Spring 2013

Big Shot

Annie Joy Heath
San Jose State University

BIG SHOT
A MEMOIR

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Annie Joy Heath

May 2013

The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

BIG SHOT
A MEMOIR

by

Annie Joy Heath

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2013

Professor Cathleen Miller	Department of English and Comparative Literature
Professor Scott Rice	Department of English and Comparative Literature
Mona P. Onstead	President, Center of Literary Arts SJS

ABSTRACT

BIG SHOT
A MEMOIR

by Annie Joy Heath

There are many forms of child abuse. Some forms leave visible scars, and other forms leave invisible ones. Both forms, and especially a combination of the two, change the behaviors as well as the decision making of the person who has been abused, whether a child or an adult. And while an adult may choose not to have the abuser in her life, a child rarely has that choice. The child usually loves her parents unconditionally and cannot comprehend why she is being mistreated. As a teenager and then an adult, she often times looks for the same type of abuser in a partner in an effort to satisfy her need to repair her emotional scars. The child needs psychological help as early as possible before she grows up and sabotages her life by making life-altering mistakes.

The writing process, by the memoirist, can be a way of healing the wounds that have been carelessly left behind by the abuser. But, on a larger scale, the memoirist who touches people with her writing has the ability to heal many more people than just herself through publication. The memoir, unlike the autobiography, has become a popular form of reaching out to large groups of people. In this way, when people who have been abused know they are not alone, and that there are many others in the world who suffer the same emotional scars, they can now begin the healing process.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, thanks to my mother for always putting us first, making us feel safe in her presence, and for always keeping the door open, with a willingness to listen, and to tell us the truth no matter how much we didn't want to hear it. Thanks to my husband for standing beside me, and partnering up with me in this writing process. I love you madly. Thanks to Cathy Miller for having the good sense to see that I had a story to tell. Thanks to Dr. Rice and Mona Onstead for agreeing to be my readers. You have both helped me more than you can imagine. And thanks to all of my workshop buddies at San Jose State who have been so kind to me in your constructive criticisms, and especially to Teri Carter who has been wonderfully supportive.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface

My family's dynamics were complex during the 1950s and 60s. I grew up post World War II when, because of women's involvement in the war, they had been given the opportunity to view their value differently than in the past. In this post-war period, women were still needed to raise their families, but since men were returning home from their war duties to take back their jobs, women were not needed in the workforce nearly as much. During the 1960s, when faced with the choice between home and career, many women found themselves unfulfilled as housewives. But some women, as was the case for the women in my family, did not have a choice. Their own survival, as well as their children's survival, was their only choice, which is what has made this work more of a discovery for me than anything else. As I made my way through the narrative of this thesis, utilizing my child's voice, perceptions, and attitudes, I was only able to touch the surface within my limited world of women, which included my mother, grandmothers, and aunts. First as a child and then as a teenager, I had no idea how important women's roles would become. It is a subject that writers still research today: the impact that World War II has had on the Women's Movement of the 1960s.

My father's role as he attempted many times to extinguish my mother's power, acted as an example in this work of how some men in the fifties and sixties could make unqualified decisions for their families, and get away with it in their daily lives, as well as in our court system, while providing little or nothing for

their family's support. My father's willingness to agree to anything in order to marry my mother involved signing an agreement to raise his offspring Catholic, knowing that he had no intention of doing so, was just the beginning of what was to come. He kept my mother pregnant until she had had enough of his power over her, and then she began to fight back to take her place in the company of many other women who went on to be respectable businesswomen in the sixties and seventies.

My questions of religion, juxtaposed with criminal behavior as the backdrop in this story, go deep into how my brother, sister, and I were raised. However, we somehow managed to survive, as well as flourish. We knew that we did not want for our own children the hand that we had been dealt.

I begin the work with an introduction of the three generations that came before me, and what brought these two families to the United States, as well as their tenaciousness to become successful Americans. And while their hardships could never compare to Frank McCourt's hardships in *Angela's Ashes*, I explored in my writing the sensitivities for these same kinds of issues, where in McCourt's case a drunk had more power within the family dynamics than the drunk's responsibility to the family he knowingly and willingly spawned. This was also the case of Tobias Wolff's mother who takes him on an adventure in *This Boy's Life*. She leaves her husband with one of her two children in tow, with little funds on a "pie in the ski" dream of discovering uranium, believing that she will be set for life (4). Unfortunately, she and Toby end up in the clutches of a man who

merely wants her to mother his children and make her his sex slave (104). And then Mary Karr's circumstances in *The Liars' Club* beg the question of why a woman would take a loaded gun and shoot at two husbands (XI), which is where Karr's story begins. Drawing on all three of these influences, I am able to open up the "revolving door" effect within *Big Shot* where I ask the question, "what if my grandfather had lived?"

A common thread in my narrative is my sense of impermanence from not having a stable home life. My influences (Wolff, McCourt, and Karr) encapsulate that same sense of impermanence in their own stories of instability. I never knew where I would be shuffled off to or moved to next. At a moment's notice, I might be left with grandparents, aunts, uncles, or even friends. In Mary Karr's case, she often times found herself in the hateful arms of her deranged grandmother (41-46). Frank McCourt went from one rat hole to the next in Ireland. The family was so desperate to keep warm that they cut up walls in their apartment to burn to keep warm (276). On a much smaller scale, my family had to do without necessities in order to pay the utility bill, which often times forced us to move. And finally, after Toby Wolff and Rosemary moved from one place to the next, not just chasing Rosemary's dream but also running away from an abusive husband, she agrees to marry Dwight (104), a psychopath much like my father. These three authors unveil the sense of impermanence in their memoirs that I talk about in the introduction of this thesis when I say, "you never know what is going to happen next, you never know where you will wake up, maybe on your

grandparent's couch, sleeping at the end of one of your cousin's beds, in the home of one of your parent's friends."

An essential component to any memoir is the author's narrative voice. The voice is like a person's signature or a person's fingerprints; the voice cannot be duplicated, maybe copied, but not duplicated. One can write with a sympathetic voice, a sarcastic voice, a conversational voice, a humorous voice, but the way an author writes his feelings and emotions are his alone. My main objective when I began my memoir was to write with a conversational voice combined with sarcasm that is laced with raw humor, which becomes my survival technique. I do this best when I talk about my dad, the big shot, in this story. As a child, I lived with the saying that "children should be seen and not heard," and I complied with this most of the time. But as I grew into my teenage years, my sarcastic barbs were a way for me to fight back and to feel better when I was faced with something I could not change. We see this especially in the chapter *Home for the Holidays* when I tell the story about my dad cheating my aunts, uncles, and great grandfather at poker on Christmas Eve, and then again in *A Day at the Track,* when after I haven't seen my dad for over a year, I make fun of his teeth. These are just a few examples of the sarcasm that is peppered throughout the story as a way of making it humorous and as a way to survive. Frank McCourt handles much of his childhood with a similar sarcasm and humor when he talks about the Irish childhood, particularly the Irish Catholic childhood (11). Mary Karr presents her childhood, not only with sarcasm and humor but

also with the way that she shocks the reader. Karr draws the reader in with events stemming from her parents' drunkenness that most children do not have to endure regularly the way that she did. Tobias Wolff is matter of fact as he informs the reader of day-to-day life with his mother throughout his memoir, but when he talks about Dwight, we continually hear anger in his narrative voice.

A technique that I particularly liked in *This Boys Life* was when Wolff interjects his future voice into the text as he goes further with the reader to tell the reader what the eventual outcome was, for instance, when he talks about the Vietnam War as a future event (121). In my story, an example of this is in the chapter *Happy Birthday to Me* when I talk about the office building that I used to run through on the corner of Empire and First Streets to get to my girlfriend's house on second street, and with one sentence, I go into the future voice and report that I marry the son of the man who owns this building. Mary Karr brings the reader up to date in her last chapter where she writes about her father's death and what eventually happens to her mother (295-320).

As a reader of memoirs, I want to know what happened in the future to the people in the story, so I have two endings: *A Perfect Day to Die* and *Peanut's Café*. My dad's death shows the sadness of losing a parent, while at the same time the personal triumph of my brother, sister, and I having succeeded in spite of the upheaval we endured as children. *Peanuts Café* is the relationship between my mother and me and how we, at long last, found our places within our little family as mother and daughter. I also use this chapter to show my search for

answers and to reflect back to the “good old days” in San Jose as Mom and I become nostalgic on our walk around San Jose State, referring to venues that we remember fondly, in turn putting San Jose on the map.

Each chapter is structured with a beginning point: an event, a theme, which I use as a vehicle to unfold a number of different occurrences. I am a big fan of “in medias res,” because it allows me to dive into the middle of the story at a point that is the most interesting, or shocking perhaps, and then go back to unravel what happened to get me to this point. For instance, in the chapter *Happy Birthday to Me,* in one of our many moves when my mother assigns me the task of sorting through boxes, I am looking for a picture of one particular birthday present. This project becomes a vehicle for me to talk about other birthdays that I experienced as a child as well. In the chapter *A Day at the Track*, after a long separation from my dad, I pick him up from the airport to take him to the racetrack so he can bet on one race. I employ this reunion to tell him all of the things that have been going on in my life in the last year. In medias res captures the reader’s interest begging her to keep reading. In this way, Mary Karr begins her story with an event that happened shortly before her mother died in which Mary’s sister, Lecia, asks their mother if that is the place where she shot at their father. The mother says that it is not the place she shot their father. It is the place she shot Larry (XI). We clearly see that this is not your everyday family. In chapter VII of *Angela’s Ashes*, Frank McCourt begins with an imaginary conversation that his dad might have with one of his drinking buddies

on a Thursday just after they have picked up their money for the week (170). In *This Boy's Life*, Tobias Wolff begins his chapters with a tension. For instance, in the chapter named *Citizenship in the Home*, he starts out with Dwight, Toby's deranged stepfather, making a "study" of him (95). Again the reader is enthralled in finding out what happens next.

The bigger picture, for me, and the value of telling my story, is that *Big Shot* is a way of writing about women in the fifties and sixties as they turned the effects of World War II into a positive movement known as the Women's Movement of the 1960s, of which my mother and I, even though from two generations, were a big part. It is my goal to continue to expand on this story to show the importance and value in knowing our history, as I did in the chapter *High School History*. This work was an opportunity for me to show how women survive when bad things happen to them, and how the knowledge of their history might give them the courage to change, as it empowers them to make their lives better.

Introduction

Some say that life is too short not to treat every day like a celebration, and I say that they are right. God knows I've tried. But when you're a little kid and you grow up with gambling, theft, and abandonment juxtaposed with a heavy dose of religion each and every day, and you never know what is going to happen next, you never know where you will wake up, maybe on your grandparent's couch, sleeping at the end of one of your cousin's beds, or in the home of one of your parent's friends, I say that there are obstacles to a celebratory life. But then you might think maybe it's you and the way you perceive things. *Maybe everybody has a father who has seedy friends who hang out in Grandpa's garage rather than come in the house and join his wife and children, and other family members. Maybe everybody has a father who gambles, and figures out ways to cheat other gamblers out of their money. Maybe everybody has an uncle who goes to prison twice for grand theft. And then maybe everybody goes to church on Sundays to pretend that these things aren't really happening and maybe we can just pray their sins away*.

But when I look back now, I realize that I wouldn't have it any other way and given the choice of where and when and with whom I would grow up and with those who would raise me, I would choose all of it. I would choose both of my parents, and I would choose to grow up right here in the Santa Clara Valley in the fifties and sixties where the sun shines down on us most of the year, and where when it is cold and rainy, us naturalized Californians are so spoiled that

we actually have the nerve to complain about the weather, even when we know that the rest of the country is buried under six feet of snow or hiding out in tornado shelters. And with this glorious California climate comes the soil this valley is so famous for: rich, black, and velvety, and from which I learned to adore vegetables. With easy access to San Francisco, Oakland, and Santa Cruz, there has always been more than enough to stimulate our minds and bodies.

As a child, it seemed like something really big was going to happen here in California, and I am not talking about earthquakes. I mean something exceptional, like we were being groomed for greatness, and it turns out I was right. The Valley of the Heart's Delight morphed into Silicon Valley—a mecca for computer geeks that made this area one of the most expensive places in the world to live. Unfortunately, my dad didn't take the opportunity to buy into it when he could have and thought of the people who lived here as "hummers." I have to admit that my parents come by their oddness honestly—and that's putting it mildly. Both sides of the family *are* a bit strange.

The Norwegians, my dad's family, had one answer to all problems—Yahtzee. Yahtzee is a simple game of strategy played with five dice. Each player has three chances to roll out the dice as he or she decides which combination to enter on the score sheet. At the end of the game the player with the most points wins. When a player rolls a Yahtzee, (five of the same dice), that player screams "YAHTZEE!!" It didn't matter what life doled out to these people;

Saturday nights were spent in front of The Lawrence Welk Show, ironing board off to the side of the black and white, Grandma pressing all of our pretties for Sunday school and then church (which we attended twice on Sundays and every Wednesday night), and then a game of Yahtzee before going to bed.

My Uncle John, my father's youngest brother stole a car when he was sixteen and then, a few years later ended up in Vacaville State Prison for robbery. The second time, only a few years after he got out of Vacaville, the judge sent him off to Soledad State Prison, this time for armed robbery. All the while, the Yahtzee game was just an arms length away.

My dad had his own criminal past: burglary, gambling, cheating, underworld connections, drugs, along with three children that he failed to support. "Let's have a game of Yahtzee!" My grandmother would say.

Uncle Dave wrote bad checks on his own father's checking account. He often drank too much, gambled, and did not support his children either. "Dad," Grandma always addressed her husband as Dad, "we could play a game of Yahtzee? Come on now," She would say in her sing-songy Midwestern Norwegian accent. "Sit up at the table and we'll all have a nice game of Yahtzee." Sit *up* at the table? Shouldn't it be sit *down* at the table?

And no matter how little they had in the way of money and material things, their house always had a fresh coat of paint, my grandfather being a painting contractor. My grandmother, a stay-at-home wife and mother who did not drive and always wore a housedress, kept the house meticulously clean. On any visit

to their home, you could count on a piece of white cake with chocolate icing, (made from scratch of course) which was conveniently stored atop the Frigidaire, and served with a hot cup of Grandma's fresh brewed coffee, and a Yahtzee game, of course.

The Italians, on the other hand, knew how to have a good time, but there was always a one-foot-in-the-grave and the other foot-on-a-banana-peel cloud hanging directly over their heads. They seemed to have the money and the means, with their lavish weddings and holiday parties, but darkness loomed in every corner of their lives, a gloom that something horrible was about to happen at any moment, and as a child, I could not understand how they could be so different from the Norwegians. Perhaps this gloomy nature came from losing my grandfather at such an early age, or maybe it was a way of protecting themselves from the tragedies that everyday life doled out so frequently and so unexpectedly.

My great grandmother had a most unusual saying that my brother, sister and I often say to each other, "Ifa you die, I'ma gonna' kill you." It was probably her way of telling all of us not to run out into the street, and if you think about it, it kind of made sense. Whatever this cloud was, the joining of these two families was truly an oddity. And while I am privy to much more of the histories of the Italian family (and Italian food was comparably better than Norwegian food), I still happily spent much more time with the Norwegians and their circus-like environment.

My Italian grandfather's untimely death changed everything for us. He died suddenly at a Halloween party the year before I was born. The story I had heard my entire life was that he was dressed in drag, dancing with a woman who was not his wife, and then fell into the arms of his new son-in-law—my dad—and died. And to make matters worse, he was celebrating his forty-fifth birthday. I had heard that not only was my grandfather dressed up like a woman, but that my dad was also in women's clothing. As I got older, I thought that the story sounded a bit racy for the 1950s so I questioned my mother about the details. She has always been quiet about this tragic night, except to tell me what a good man my grandfather was, and the enormous amount of friends he had, and that of his three children, *she* was his favorite. I thought perhaps that her silence was because it was just too painful for her to talk about, but sixty years had passed and I wanted to know the absolute details of this night that changed our lives so drastically.

"That's not the way it happened," she said. "My dad, your grandfather, was dressed in a black 1920s tuxedo with top hat and tails." I stood in the doorway of her bedroom, eyebrows creased, mouth open, in shock and disbelief as I listened to her destroy these images cemented in my brain for such a long time. "Your dad was dressed in one of the bridesmaid's dresses from our wedding. He wore a picture hat that went with the dress." There are many types of picture hats but their distinguishing feature is a wide brim. The picture hats worn in my parents' wedding had a round hole cut out at the top that left the

woman's head, or in this case the man's head, exposed. These chiffon hats flounced around according to how the woman moved her head or the direction that the wind blew. "Your dad and my dad walked into the party arm in arm, and as you can imagine, they created quite a stir. I can't remember exactly how tall my dad was, but I do remember him as being very short. Side by side with your dad over six feet tall, they looked ridiculous," she laughed.

"Did my grandfather show any signs of being ill that night?" I asked.

"Oh yea, he didn't want to go to the party, but Nana forced him to go," Mom said angrily. I thought Mom was going to clam up, once again at the feelings this memory must have stirred up, but she seemed to want to tell her story this time.

"You remember all the stories about your grandfather having heart problems?" She asked.

"Yes, I've heard them many times," I said. My nana had told me that my grandfather would stop off somewhere before coming home for dinner and eat a large greasy meal. She tried desperately to enforce the diet that the doctor told him would improve his poor health, but the fatty foods combined with the high stress of being one of the owners in an International Truck agency on Alum Rock Avenue just plain did him in.

"Raylene kept bugging me and telling me that my dad shouldn't be here," Mom said. Raylene's family lived next door, and she was a year younger than my mother. "She kept saying that he didn't look well and that I should make him

go home. She even told me that she thought that he was going to die if I didn't do something. I looked at her like she was crazy. My parents weren't going to die. They were way too young to die. I really thought that she had lost her mind." Mom paused and stared off into the vanity mirror in front of her as if she was trying to create a do-over.

"So then what happened?" I asked impatiently.

"A little while later Raylene rushed up to your dad and me with her hair on fire frantically telling us that my dad was in the back yard sitting on a bench with his head in his hands. We stormed out the back door only to find him walking back into the party. We followed him into the house and watched him grab the arm of some woman. I don't remember who she was. And then he started dancing with her. Maybe less than thirty seconds later, he was on the floor. Your dad rushed over and pulled him up into his arms and he just died right there on the floor in your dad's arms. I really don't remember much after that other than our lives were very very different."

My grandfather had occupied the largest piece of our family mobile. His death left the remaining pieces grossly out of balance, hanging lifeless and shattered, unable to function properly. Ironically, the person whose arms he died in—my dad—a truly inferior and weak piece of the mobile, became the determining factor in the direction that our family would now take.

My dad—his friends and family called him Danny—his sister Ona, and his brother David, were all born in Cooperstown, North Dakota. When my grandparents took their children and left both of their families behind in North Dakota to head west, my dad was about sixteen. They first settled in Everett, Washington, where their last child, John was born. My dad never finished high school. He was way too smart to waste his time on an education. Some say that his life of crime began when he was only five when he stole a wagon full of apples from the local grocery story in Cooperstown. From there, he advanced to petty theft, breaking into a hardware store via the chimney, where he got stuck and the fire department had to come and rescue him, and then he got caught breaking into a gas station to sell gasoline after hours. Like I said, he was way too smart for an education and it is my guess that the reason the Wagles left North Dakota was so that their son could start a new life where no one knew him.

I know little about the Norwegian's ancestry. I only know that my grandfather, Olaf Wagle, was born Olaf Vagle in Stavanger, Norway, on April 8, 1901 and came with his family to the United States at the age of ten to settle in Cooperstown. They immediately, and not legally, changed the "V" in Vagle to a "W," making the new name Wagle, which they thought would Americanize their name. I suffered with the nicknames, Wiggle Wagle and Wiggley Wagley my entire life.

Cooperstown was a small farming community, so small that when I sent Great Grandma Wagle a letter, I addressed it to Great Grandma Wagle,

Cooperstown, North Dakota. No address, no zip. My grandfather married my grandmother, Louise Midstock, also known as Lucy, some time after she graduated from high school. Grandma was born in Sharon, North Dakota, on July 8, 1905. Upon graduation, she taught school in a one-room schoolhouse—first grade through twelfth grade. She also marcelled women's hair in her mother's kitchen with a curling iron that I still have and cherish.

Grandpa Wagle loved to tell the story about how he would ski cross country twenty-two miles from Cooperstown to Sharon just to see my grandmother, the love of his life. I spent two weeks in Cooperstown in August of 1957, celebrating my sixth birthday, getting to know the rest of the family.

My grandmother's family was also from Norway. She had a brother that everyone called Kinx because of his black kinky hair. When I would remark that Uncle Kinx looked like Nat King Cole, my grandmother would shush me. "Don't say that, Miss Muffet." (Grandma always called me Miss Muffet. Maybe she had some insights as to how many spiders I would have to run away from most of my life). "You'll hurt Uncle Kinx's feelings." I guess there's a family secret there somewhere, but she took it to her grave, whatever it was.

The Lofanos were hardworking, highly successful Italian immigrants, and when they came to the United States their goal was to fit in by learning to speak English correctly, and to truly become Americans. As many immigrants did back then, they came to the United States for the opportunity to make a ton of money.

My grandfather, Domenico LoFano, known in America as Johnny or John Dominick Lofano, was born on October 29, 1905, in Conversano, Bari, Puglia, Italy. He was in his twelfth year when he stepped onto Ellis Island on May 29, 1917. He had crossed the Atlantic Ocean on a ship called *Dante Alighieri* by himself to meet his parents who had left Italy for the United States six months earlier. His destination, again traveling alone but now across the United States by train, was 414 Joseph Street in San Jose, where his family had established residency with other family members. His father, Michael LoFano, had been a wine maker in Italy and continued his winemaking business in San Jose until 1920 when prohibition laws allowed Italian-Americans to make wine solely for family consumption. Fortunately, another fellow Italian named Domenic Butera, who lived in San Francisco, wanted to marry Michael's daughter, Theresa. And as the story goes, in order for my great grandfather to give them his blessing, he told Dominic that he and Dominic would go into business together so that he could see what kind of a businessman Dominic was. Thus, a very profitable cherry orchard began its life in Cupertino. My Auntie Annette married Jack Walsh and they bought an apricot orchard in the Evergreen Valley. My Auntie Mary Jane married Ross Tomasello who went into the car business with my grandfather and his brother Leo, who married Auntie Francis. My Auntie Ann married Uncle Ross's brother Tony. And the grand union was between my grandfather, Johnny, age twenty-five and my nana, age fifteen. Great Grandpa Lonero, my nana's father, and Great Grandpa Lofano arranged this marriage

between their children. My grandparents barely knew each other. So there you have most of the begats in the Lofano family, on their way to success in America.

Santa Clara Valley had two descriptive names: Valley of Heart's Delight, and Garden of Eden. Interestingly, the area in Italy, Apulia, where my mother's father is from, was also known as Garden of Eden, and for this reason, they instinctively knew that they wanted to settle here in San Jose. But the combination of my Italian/Norwegian relatives was a bit odd, to say the least. They certainly did not nurture, within their families, the fertile ground that the Santa Clara Valley was known for. I was a bit confused as a child because not only did our own father refer to my brother, sister, and I as half-breeds (Italian/Norwegian), our religion also seemed to be split in half. The Norwegians were Protestant, and the Italians were Catholic. I often wondered what it meant for me when I came to understand that the Protestants believed that the Catholics were going to go to Hell because they were not Protestants and the Catholics shook their heads at the Protestants because, without a doubt, they would surely be going to Hell because they were not Catholics.

World War II had ended in 1945, but still fresh in everyone's minds, it meant that most women could return to their domestic duties as wives and mothers. My mother, while she still remembered WW II as a child she was too young for this to have that kind of impact on her life. At seventeen, on April 16, 1950, two months away from graduating from San Jose High School, then

located on the San Jose State campus, my mother married my dad. Her expectations were for her to stay home and raise her children—the same way her mother had, the same way her aunts had, and the same way her mother-in-law had. She would lead a charmed life. My father would be a sales manager or have some other management position in my grandfather's car business and he would make lots of money. Our family would have no financial worries. Unfortunately, my grandfather's death changed all of that, not because my dad was not capable of working or because he couldn't find a job. He just had different ideas about how to make money that did not include a nine-to-five work schedule.

During the fifties and early sixties, my Italian family lived in the east foothills of San Jose off of Alum Rock Avenue. The demographics were Portuguese, Germans, Irish, Italians, and Mexicans with no visible prejudices that I could see until I was much older. My parents moved from one place to another and when my father would disappear, and we couldn't pay the rent, we would move back in with Grandma and Grandpa Wagle, who lived in Willow Glen, or with Nana. While living with Nana, I started Kindergarten at Horace Cureton Elementary School. Then when I moved in with Grandma Wagle, I attended Willow Glen Elementary School in the first grade. I began the second grade at Jefferson Elementary School on Hobson Street off of North First Street when we moved into a duplex on Hobson Street, which was a block away from our school. On the other side of our duplex, about a block west of our school, ran the

Guadalupe River. When I was ten, my mother moved to the outskirts of the Willow Glen area. That move to the west side of San Jose placed us in a population of people that seemed mostly what we call “white” today.

We attended First Covenant Church on Coe Avenue and also went to The Free Church. Both churches were in Willow Glen. First Covenant was predominately Swedish, and since the Swedish have known prejudices against the Norwegians, particularly with Norwegians whose father and uncles participate in criminal behaviors, and then being a half breed myself, I had a difficult time fitting in with these people. But I somehow managed to stay long enough to be confirmed and baptized when I was thirteen and then left the Covenants when I was sixteen.

Two gangs emerged as I entered middle school: hard guys and surfers. The hard guys were darker skinned with slicked back hair. They wore black slacks, tight fitting button down shirts, and kept a close eye on their girlfriends who usually ratted their hair and wore lots of makeup. They listened to Motown, also known as, *Oldies but Goodies*. The surfers were from the lighter skinned groups, with sun-bleached long blond hair and ocean blue eyes. They wore t-shirts, light colored khaki pants, and sandals. Most of them knew how to surf, or at least pretended to, and they drove Woodies with surfboard racks on top. And as far as girlfriends, they were free spirits with a ‘love the one you’re with,’ attitude. This was a saying that became popular in the late sixties from Stephen Still’s song. Even though there were fewer hard guys than surfers, once again I

identified as a half-breed. There were some clashes between these groups in the high school parking lots, but a funny thing happened about 1967 when everyone started smoking that Humboldt County homegrown, the hard guys and the surfers merged. Their differences became less important. The popular music became folk, rhythm and blues, psychedelic, and occasionally Oldies But Goodies, but the pot smoking by both gangs created a much more relaxed atmosphere, or at least this was true in my little world of, our label—Hippies.

I can honestly say again that I wouldn't change a thing, even if I could. And anyway, what would I have to write about? Frank McCourt said in *Angela's Ashes*, "the happy childhood is hardly worth your while." My earliest memories of childhood, I spent most of my time whining and complaining about every inconvenience I suffered as a result of my parent's union, from having to walk to and from school as early as when I was in Kindergarten, unheard of today, and having to eat my oatmeal with a raw egg scrambled into it, making me late for Kindergarten, where I really didn't want to go anyway. And if that wasn't bad enough, my dad drove the ugliest oldest cars he could find, but when he came home one day with a brand new Pontiac, which he soon lost to the lender, I was unhappy with that too because how could anybody be so stupid as to buy a Pontiac when Dinah Shore sang my favorite jingle, "See Ellis Brooks today for your Chevrolet?" Why would anyone in their right mind want to buy a Pontiac when they could have a Chevrolet? And when my mother was pregnant for the

third time and I was certain that she was having a girl, I demanded that her name be Cinderella. I was five and a half when my sister was born and had just seen the movie. My mother finally agreed to Cindy.

I often wondered if I was even related to these people, and I, of course, brought this to my mother's attention several times. When my father was home, he would say, "children should be seen and not heard." This was a phrase adults used in the fifties. My dad told us it was a Bible verse, which I found out later to be untrue. One would think he was a scholar of theology the way he translated these supposed verses for his own purposes.

I cannot help but wonder what my life would have been like if Johnny Lofano had not died that fateful night in October. Would my grandfather's good example be what my dad needed to grow up and become a man, or would my dad have eventually gone back to his old ways, leaving my grandfather with no other choice but to kill him and then end up in jail?

A Child's Prayer

Now I lay me down to sleep,

I pray the Lord my soul to keep,

If I should die before I wake,

I pray the Lord my soul to take. Amen

As a child, I said this prayer every night just before getting into bed. My brother, and sister, and I followed it by "God bless . . . " and then a long list of relatives that even included Daddy. Whenever I closed my eyes to recite this prayer, I saw a beautiful old wall made of different shapes and different kinds of stones in soft earthy colors, primitively slathered with cement, just enough to hold it all together. Maybe I saw artwork out of a Hansel and Gretel storybook. I've tried for many years to understand the significance of this wall, but nothing comes to mind. This wall doesn't appear when I say grace before dinner, only when I say this particular nighttime prayer before bed.

Chapter I

Lying

Daddy hated lying. If my brother, Moke, and I could count on nothing else, the one thing we *could* count on was that lying to Daddy was the sin of all sins, and if we were caught in a lie we knew that we would never be able to get back into his good graces ever again. I had just turned eight and Moke, (a nick name for Mickey given to him by our dad) would turn six in October, so “ever again” gave a whole new meaning to our relationship with Daddy.

On a beautiful fall day in 1959, because the two of us had become seasoned and experienced liars, although unsuccessful at not getting caught up to this point, we felt the need to test our bad luck once again. We lived in a two-bedroom duplex at the time only a block away from the forbidden Guadalupe Creek, where according to Daddy, danger lurked in each and every grain of sand. Daddy had made a rule when we first moved into the duplex just before I started the second grade that we were not to play in the Guadalupe Creek under any circumstances. “Do you understand, Annie Joy?” He had asked. It was not really a question that I needed to verbally answer, so I nodded my head yes. “Do you understand, Moke?” But since Daddy only made guest appearances in our lives, we did not expect to walk in the front door and have him standing in our living room on the very day we had played in the creek.

Moke and I stood side by side looking up at him in horror as if he were a giant crazy man coming to scoop us up and take us to that unknown place all

children feared. Both of our arms were filled with utensils that we had taken from the kitchen. Daddy immediately reached over our heads and closed the door behind us, making the room dismally dark as we scrunched into the small entryway like two little penguins joined at the hip. No one spoke, our eyes wide in terror. He just looked down at us and said, “Have you kids been playing in the creek?” I couldn’t remember when I had seen him last and all he could say was, “Have you kids been playing in the creek?”

Now, it would have been so much easier on all of us if we had just joined the ranks of George Washington and told the truth. We had after all learned the benefits of telling the truth from this exact story and how much better one feels no matter how much it hurts to tell the truth, because Grandma Wagle told us all the time that “the truth will set you free.” But when confronted with someone so powerful as Daddy the predicament we were in became so impossible for either of us that we both did what we knew best. We unconvincingly shook our heads from side to side and adamantly said “NO.” We knew that we were not allowed to play in the creek, but we also knew that that rule did not apply when Mommy was in charge, which was most of the time.

There was something evil about him showing up today though. He was wearing black Frisco jeans and a white t-shirt. His black hair was slicked back, and his green eyes glared at us with hatred. For the past few years, I could only remember him in dark slacks and a white button-up shirt, no tie, but it was his backside I remember the most—walking out the door. “Goin’ to see a man about

a horse," he would say in his lowest deepest voice. Or, "goin' out to get a pack a cigarettes." We soon translated the cigarette and horse excuse as code for "see you in six months." But who was counting? When he was home, he was either flush with cash or he was flat broke, but whatever the circumstance, he was always in the way of our good time and today was just one more day of the same.

It had been a delightful plan to go to the creek. It started off with Mommy giving us twenty-five cents each, our allowance money for the week, so we went to the corner market to buy two packs of candy cigarettes, and we even had money left over. We brought a bunch of plastic and tin cups from the kitchen with us. Mommy was at work and she had no choice but to leave me in charge of Moke. She didn't have the extra money to pay a babysitter during the summer and she needed to work because we wouldn't have any money at all if she didn't work.

When we made our way down to the creek, we immediately went on an expedition collecting sticks to carve out territories in the sand, pretending like we were camping. We lined out a kitchen area where we cut up carrots and celery for lunch, another area specifically for eating, and a bedroom because all houses have bedrooms, and then the backyard for playing was near the water line. This kept us busy for the better part of the day, making up king and queen stories, pretending to be adults by smoking our candy cigarettes, and then later when we got bored, pretending like we were Tonto and The Lone Ranger. By the time we

walked through the front door, we didn't know that our Keds were covered in sand.

"Have you kids been playing in the creek?" He asked again, his voice sounding more impatient than the first time. Again, we shook our heads no.

"I am going to ask you one more time. Have you kids been playing in the creek?" He looked down at our shoes then.

I had heard Daddy argue with Mommy about spankings awhile back. He didn't believe in spankings so I figured we wouldn't get our butts whipped, but I did remember a time when Mickey was slow to get ready in the morning and Daddy kicked him in the butt. I began to cry then because I didn't know what was going to happen to us. I just knew that a nice day had been ruined and the ruining wasn't over yet. Mickey was too young to make the connection—sandy shoes = playing in the creek, so he continued to shake his head no.

"If you haven't been playing in the creek, where did all that sand come from?" He asked.

"We were in the creek," I said softly.

The part of the Guadalupe that Moke and I played in doesn't exist anymore. It has since been restructured to make the water flow on the other side of Guadalupe Parkway, a six-or eight-lane expressway which has taken the place of the creek. All of the houses between our duplex and the creek are gone now and there is a high stone wall to separate the freeway from the old neighborhood.

Unfortunately, we never played in that forbidden creek again after that day. And even though Daddy was not a spanker, there was just something about the possibility of his surprising us again and how he would make us feel that kept us away from going back.

Some time after the frightening creek incident, Moke and I were playing in the front yard, and a Yellow Cab pulled up to the front of our duplex. When we saw Daddy step out of the front seat onto the sidewalk we ran out to greet him. He pulled me toward him and kissed me on the cheek. At the same time he extended his right hand out to shake hands with Moke. It was a Saturday so our sister, Cindy, was home. Cindy stayed at Aunt Pat's house during the week while Mommy was at work. She was only three. Daddy didn't know Cindy very well because she was hardly ever home when he came to visit. He had on grey slacks and a pale orange shirt opened at the neck with no tie. He always looked handsome, like Frank Sinatra handsome, and he seemed happy to see us this time. He opened the back door of the cab. Moke and I gasped and screamed at what we saw. The entire back seat and floor was filled with toys and big stuffed animals. He started handing us as many things as we could carry. "Go and get your mother," Daddy said. Mom was in the garage doing the laundry when we stumbled up the driveway with our bonanza of games and toys. "Daddy's here and he has a bunch of toys in the car," I said out of breath. "Can you go help Mommy?"

A few days later Mommy and Daddy told us that Daddy was coming home to live with us again. This time he said that he was moving home "for good." Moke and I had mixed emotions. We had been doing fine without him. I started dinner. Moke took out the garbage. We both helped Mommy on the weekends with housework and laundry. But it would be nice to have Mommy stay home and make snacks for us after school. It would be nice to have Mommy home in the afternoon so we didn't have to come home to a dark house alone. And it would be nice if we didn't have so many chores to do so we could get all of our homework done. Up to that point, Daddy had been home just long enough to get Mommy pregnant: first with Moke, and then three years later he popped in and . . . voila, nine months after that we had a little sister. At the age of eight, taking care of Daddy and Mommy's children and taking over Mommy's responsibilities while she took over Daddy's responsibilities was not my idea of a good time. And he was always in the way of my good time. He would not allow me to talk back to my mother, call Moke stupid, or read in front of the television. I used to wish he would go away and never come back, and if he died, that was just fine with me. And now, he announced that he was home "for good."

We had moved out of a cute little house in Willow Glen in the middle of the night to avoid paying the back rent and into the duplex on Hobson Street, off of North First Street in San Jose. Our little house in Willow Glen was small but it had a large family room in the back of the house where Moke and I played. Moke and I suffered through the measles in that house together and this house

began my first memories of Daddy's friends picking him up to go out at night. The duplex was small in comparison to the house in Willow Glen. It was in the back of the other duplex and shared a garage with the people who lived in the front. The rooms were close together with only a short hallway to separate the living room, kitchen, bathroom, and two small bedrooms. Moke and I shared a room until Cindy came home from Aunt Pat's on the weekends and then I had to share a bed with Cindy. Even though our lives were easier, and quieter without Cindy (she talked a lot), having to endure her screaming fits every time we left her at Aunt Pat's house on Sunday nights was harder than having her around all week. I just wasn't old enough to take care of a three-year old. Maybe Daddy's moving home would change all that.

The first week that he was home, he barely left the house and things did not change much for us as a family except that instead of Moke and me greeting Mommy after school with an afternoon snack all prepared, as we had hoped, we greeted Daddy who was talking on the telephone making plans for his evening. Didn't everybody have a father who left at six o'clock at night and then came home some time before we all woke up in the morning? Didn't everybody have a father who didn't attend church on Sundays because he was too tired from being up all night? Didn't everybody have a father who didn't participate in family parties and weddings because he felt uncomfortable? Mommy used to tell her aunts and uncles, when they asked where Daddy was, that he was "working."

Mommy had gotten a job at Plymouth City, a car dealership on Market Street in downtown San Jose. She had to lie about her qualifications in order to get the job, but when the owner found out he soon forgave her because he knew that she could do the job she was hired to do. Once Mr. Bonasera, one of the owners, saw how we lived (we didn't have a refrigerator) he bought us one.

One day during Daddy's stay, I came home from school. I was by myself, as Moke had stopped off at a friend's house to play. Coming in from a bright sunny day the house seemed darker to me than it actually was especially with all of the curtains drawn. If Mommy were home, the curtains would be open. I peeked around the door to see if a burglar was hiding behind the door before I closed it. Nobody. I waited by the door after I closed it and listened for noise and for my eyes to adjust to the light. I could see a dim light coming from the kitchen. As I walked into the kitchen, which was usually bright with the afternoon sun, the Venetian blinds faced downward. The kitchen seemed spooky so I turned on the light to release the ghosts—a looming threat in all dark places. When the blinds faced upward the room looked friendly and warm.

I stood paralyzed in the doorway at the sight of Daddy sitting at the kitchen table. The grey Formica table where we ate Swanson's chicken pies, spaghetti and meatballs, and Mommy's version of what later became Hamburger Helper, along with ice cold milk at dinner time, and pancakes—always Mommy's throat-tickling pancakes on Saturdays was now covered with newspaper and there was

a lamp on the table that had been taken from the living room. The lamp looked out of place in the kitchen. Lamps belonged in living rooms and bedrooms, not in kitchens. There were four or five decks of cards on the table. They seemed to be waiting in a line, standing perfectly trim at attention like tin soldiers who had been ordered not to move until called upon. No card tricks today. No magic from Daddy. Not even any fancy shuffling. A small brown bottle stood stoically directly in front of Daddy with a tiny brush sticking out of it. Daddy looked up quickly when I turned on the light, so intense on what he was doing he didn't hear me come in.

The phone rang, startling the silence. Daddy looked at the phone and then he looked back at me and said, "I want you to answer the phone and if the person asks for me, tell the man that I am not here." And then he pulled the black receiver off of the wall phone and just handed it to me like it was a hot potato he had just taken out of the oven. (Letting telephones ring, waiting for caller ID to identify who was on the phone, or letting the message machine pick up the call was unheard of in 1959).

"Hello." My voice sounded quiet and timid. I was scared.

The surly, raspy voice responded. "Is Dan there?"

After all of the lectures I had heard about how bad lying is and what a sin lying is and how I should never ever tell a lie, I said "no" and I handed the phone back to Daddy quickly. The man on the phone sounded so creepy that I thought

that he must have been the devil himself and lying to the devil was probably okay.

Daddy put the phone back on the wall. He was angry with me because he said that the man would know that I had lied to him. He just looked at me with disgust and disappointment. Then he asked me to get him an ink blotter. *What in the world is an ink blotter?* I wondered. I didn't say anything. I must have just looked confused. "An ink blotter," he said impatiently. "You use it when you write to blot the ink so it won't smear on the paper. I see you writing all the time, Annie Joy. What do you use to blot the ink?"

"I don't have an ink blotter Daddy," I said and with that I ran through the kitchen door and out the front door as if Satan himself were chasing me. My friend Rosa lived three houses down from us. Her mom was home everyday, and even though the unpleasant smell of cooking oil and corn tortillas stuck in my nose for the rest of the afternoon, I knew I could camp out there for a couple of hours until Mommy got home, and at least I felt free and safe from Daddy's disappointing stares and whatever he was doing to those cards.

A few days later Mommy hired a babysitter named Irma Citti to watch over us in the afternoons. Her parents lived on a small farm about four blocks from us. Years later, when Guadalupe Parkway was finished, I could see their farm if I looked to the right and down from where Guadalupe Parkway began to climb and became an overpass at Market Street. Developers have since built condos on that site.

Irma was in high school when Mommy hired her. She used to take us home with her because she had to do her chores before she did anything else. Irma and her parents were immigrants from Italy and her parents did not speak English at all, so Irma or her younger sister Flora had to translate for Moke and me. The Cittis had pigeons and chickens and Irma's father made red wine in a big garage in the back of their house. Moke liked to run all over the property and then sit underneath the fig tree exhausted while he ate figs, but I liked to watch Irma do her work. I remember peeking over the top of the wine vat one day when Mr. Citti walked around it holding a big stick as he stirred the wine. I could see dead flies bobbing around on top of the dark red color.

After Irma fed the pigeons, she would let me help her feed the chickens. Often times we would find a little mouse in the chicken feed barrel and she would fish around in the seeds and grab its tail only to throw it into a barrel of water. If it was pigeon day, Irma would let the pigeons finish their dinner and then she would grab one from the high perch in their pigeon house and break its neck all in one motion. I can still hear the pigeon's tiny neck bones crackling as her hands masterfully grabbed the body and the head making a quick snap so the pigeon didn't have the chance to bite her. She would pluck out all of the feathers at the outdoor sink and then wrap the small bloody bird in newspaper and bring it into the house to remove the guts, cut it up in small pieces, and boil it in water. When it was chicken day, I would chase the chickens around the chicken coup to distract them, and Irma would snatch one of them by the neck and run to the

cutting board. I had to make sure that I got out of the chicken coup without letting any of the chickens out. By the time I wiggled my way through the door backwards, Irma would be standing at the sink plucking feathers off of the headless chicken.

My dad continued his commitment to stay home but we rarely saw him. This was probably because he finally found a job. He now worked for a trucking company called P.I.E. The owner, Ralph Ditullio and his wife Pat were Mommy's high school friends. Ralph was also a friend with Daddy. This meant that Daddy would try hard to hang onto his job because he did not want to let his friend Ralph down and that he would really and truly stay "home for good." So instead of *coming in* at four o'clock in the morning, he was *going out* at four o'clock in the morning. Mommy would get up with him and make him onion rings before he went to work. The odor of the frying onions dipped in batter woke me up most mornings. Daddy only worked for P.I.E for about a month before he quit.

One Saturday morning as Moke, Cindy, and I sat in front of our Saturday morning lineup not necessarily in this order: Casper the Ghost, Sky King, The Mickey Mouse Club, The Lone Ranger, and Mighty Mouse, the scent of pancakes permeated every square inch of the house. Daddy walked through the front door with a mouth full of gauze and went straight to their bedroom to sleep the day away. We didn't know that he had left early before we got up. We thought that

he was still sleeping. Moke and I were glad that he was sick because it meant that Moke and I could sit in front of the television longer watching cartoons without being bugged until it was time to do our chores. Even at age eight, I was a multi-tasker and I could read a book and watch cartoons at the same time. When Daddy saw me doing this, he would tell me in a stern voice to, “Put the book down.” He didn’t like to see me reading all the time so at night I would tell Mommy to leave the hall light on because I was scared and I could lie on the end of the bed and read.

Grandma Wagle had started buying me a series of nurse books at Bergman’s Department Store in Willow Glen called *Cherry Ames* by Helen Wells, and I could not stop reading them. I would read each book over and over again until a new book came out, and Grandma would buy it for me and give it to me the next time I went to see her. I often times found Daddy reading the newspaper but never books. The times he spent with the newspaper he had a pencil in his hand writing down math problems directly onto the newspaper page. I didn’t know it at the time but later I found out that the page he wrote on was the sports page. We soon learned that the reason he had come home with a mouth full of gauze and went straight to bed was because he had had all of his teeth pulled out. He was twenty-nine years old. Mommy said that he had rotten teeth and that was the reason that it was so important to brush our teeth every morning and every night before we go to bed.

Without teeth, his lips puckered together and his cheeks made his face look like he had two craters for cheeks on both sides of his face. When Irma brought us home, if Daddy was there, that meant that she could walk back to her house without us. In a few days Daddy was up and about and ready to look for another job. When we lived in Willow Glen, he had worked for Grandpa Wagle painting and hanging wallpaper, and I thought that after the truck-driving job he would go to work for Grandpa again. But one day Moke and I stood in the bathroom after school and watched him put some goop on his hair to make it turn grey. He went into the kitchen and cracked an egg into a bowl, keeping the yoke in the eggshell and throwing it into the sink. He whipped the egg white with a fork until it was frothy like when Grandma Wagle made Angel Food cake. Then he spread the egg stuff on his face. After his face dried, his skin looked pruney like when I stayed too long in the bathtub and my fingers shriveled up. When he was finished, he put on horn-rimmed glasses and we practically didn't know him because he looked like an old man. But there was always something about his eyes that made me know that he was Daddy. When Mommy got home from work that day, she gave him a ride to Chinatown only a few blocks away. Today we call this area near First Street and Jackson, Japan Town. When we finally saw him again, he had been gone for maybe three or four days. Mommy had gone to Chinatown after dinner to pick him up. He went straight to their bedroom and fell asleep and he was still sleeping when we got home the next day from

school, so Irma stayed with us until Mommy got home from work. He had slept so long that his days and his nights were all mixed up.

His Chinatown visits became so regular after that that sometimes he would bring home dinner from one of the Chinese restaurants. One time he brought home a boneless chicken stuffed with a gooey sticky over-cooked white rice. He told us that the owner of the restaurant gave him the chicken. The chicken skin was still white and soft and creepy looking like an old man's big fat fingers, not crispy like when Mommy made chicken. Mommy placed this blob on a platter where it looked flat and deformed before she cut the legs and wings off and cut the breast in half. I knew I was going to have a hard time eating it and Daddy kept telling us how lucky we were that the man had given it to us because if he hadn't, we wouldn't have anything to eat.

"How did the man get the bones out of the chicken Daddy?" I asked.

"Well," he paused. "It's a special thing that the Chinese do with their chickens. He wouldn't tell me. He said it was a secret, but he told me that we would really like it."

I picked at the chicken and the rice. I had chosen a wing because I knew there wouldn't be much meat and pulled the creepy skin away. This was one night that I didn't have to be told to eat my vegetables.

It wasn't all bad, though. Sometimes when Daddy happened to be home on a Saturday morning, he would pull all of the leftover vegetables out of the

refrigerator and throw them into the black iron skillet. When he heard the vegetables sizzle, he scrambled eggs with a fork and added them to the vegetable concoction. While we didn't like this mixture as much as we loved Mommy's pancakes, we liked being around Daddy when he was in a good mood singing Tutti Fruiti and dancing, pretending like he was Little Richard. In the summer he played in the sprinklers with us. One Saturday, he spent the whole day with us running through the water, having races, and then we had a picnic outside for lunch.

Most Sundays Mommy dropped Moke and me off at The First Covenant Church in Willow Glen where we attended Sunday school, and then after Sunday school we went to church with Grandma and Grandpa Wagle. Before Auntie Ona and her husband Uncle Don moved to Pasadena, they also went to church with us. And then sometimes Uncle John and Uncle David came too, although my Sunday school teacher brought me over to the window several times to show me that Uncle John smoked cigarettes in Grandpa's car when he should have been sitting in church or attending Sunday school. Daddy and Mommy only went to church with us when something special was going on: Easter and Christmas. Moke and I were the only children whose parents didn't go to church.

In Sunday school, we learned that lying was just about the worst thing we could do and if we lied we would surely go to Hell. We learned that God could come at any moment and take us to Heaven and if we had lied and not asked for forgiveness, he would not take us with Him to Heaven. We also learned that

smoking was just as bad, and if you lied about smoking, the worst imaginable thing would happen to you when you got to Hell and the Devil got ahold of you.

We had two invitations for Sunday dinner. We ate at Grandma and Grandpa Wagle's or we went to Nana's house. Grandma and Grandpa lived in a little house in Willow Glen not far from the house on Pine that we moved out of last year. Grandma always prepared a roast, mashed potatoes, gravy, and peas for Sunday dinner, which was served at 1:00 sharp. After dinner Grandpa went straight to his recliner and fell asleep while the women, including me cleaned up the kitchen. Sometimes Uncle John taught Moke and me how to play card games like Old Maid and Crazy Eights that Grandma had bought for us at Bergman's. Real decks of cards, liquor, and dancing, even though Grandma taught me how to do the Charleston and the Black Bottom, were forbidden in their house. Grandma didn't believe in dancing because she said it caused people to get a divorce, so I often wondered how she knew all of the steps. Grandpa, and anyone else who smoked, had to smoke in the garage or outside.

But it was at their house that I first saw Elvis Presley on the Ed Sullivan Show. I was only five years old sitting on the floor in front of the black-and-white. Everyone in the house (except Grandma) gathered around the TV to watch Elvis sing "Hound Dog" and dance. When Grandma walked in the room and saw what we were watching, she said "Oh, Dad. Uff da. Shut that thing off." No one moved or made any motion toward the television. I don't think anyone had ever seen anyone like Elvis Presley before. Rock and Roll had begun that very day

and we had no idea how different music would be after Elvis Presley appeared on Ed Sullivan.

This was also the house where I learned to read. Grandma taught me the basics—the letters and the sounds they made. I had already memorized "The Night Before Christmas" so I could follow along with the words that I knew and I began to recognize and sound out words. I picked up anything with words: newspapers, novels written for adults, and magazines like *Reader's Digest*. If there were words, then I could read. And if Mommy left me with Grandma and Grandpa and never ever brought me back home again, I would have been so much happier.

It was in this house that I first had little girl's coffee: a mixture of coffee, mostly milk, and sugar. It was in this house where I learned to do the dishes standing on a chair and where I helped Grandma make sugar cookies and roll out lefse, a Norwegian tortilla that Grandma would make with leftover mashed potatoes. I learned to dust the furniture here and always clean the bathrooms before we could do anything fun because when we got the housework finished, we could walk to downtown Willow Glen and go to Bergman's where they kept the children's books upstairs. We had little money, but Grandma made sure she had enough to buy me a book and then go to Pronto Pups, a soda fountain down the street from Bergman's, for a wax stick filled with flavored syrup. And on the way home, we stopped at the Trio Market for a stick of butter, a quart of milk, and a loaf of bread, which was all we could carry. Grandma didn't drive. Years later I

learned that my close friend Carol Becker had lived in this house before we lived here, and that her father was Uncle David and Uncle John's basketball coach at Willow Glen High School.

The year that I turned six, soon after we visited Great Grandma Wagle in North Dakota, I lived with Grandma and Grandpa and I started school at Willow Glen Elementary on the corner of Lincoln and Minnesota Avenues. Willow Glen Elementary is still there but the two-story building that I went to school in, where we read in groups and practiced our penmanship every single day, has since been torn down to make way for newer buildings and a nicer play yard.

Grandma's house was safe and warm and smelled like coffee, sugar, peppermint, and horse liniment. Yes, horse liniment. Grandma had horse liniment in her private stash and when one of us came home with sore muscles, out came this concoction in a tall forest green bottle. Uncle John and Uncle David both went to Willow Glen High School and played basketball and baseball. When they came home with sore achy muscles, out would come the horse liniment. These smells and the sound of the wooden screen door slamming are instilled in my memory. I have wonderful memories of this Old Spanish style home that I still drive by occasionally just to make sure it is still there and to see if it is for sale.

Nana's house, so different from Grandma's, always smelled like garlic. In fact, as hard as she tried with all of her soaps and perfumes, Nana even smelled like garlic. She always had a pot of spaghetti sauce cooking for Great Grandpa

Lonero, her father, who ate a big bowl of spaghetti or macaroni with sausage or meatballs just before he ate a big dinner. When Nana fried breaded eggplant or breaded veal, you could smell what Nana was cooking for blocks away. And Nana let us watch whatever we wanted on television. *My Little Margie*, *The Ann Sothern Show*, and cowboys and Indians, *Dragnet*, a program that Daddy never let us watch if he were home. "Too violent," he said. And it was Nana who taught us how to jitterbug to Bill Haley and His Comets singing "Rock Around the Clock." And it was Nana who showed us how to play solitaire and poker with real cards.

If we went to church at all when we stayed with Nana, we went to Five Wounds, a Catholic church that Aunt Pat and Uncle Rick were married in on Santa Clara Street just before it turns into Alum Rock Avenue. I, not Moke, had to have a hanky placed on my head anytime we entered Five Wounds. Nana would take a dab of holly water on three of her fingers at the back of the church and do the sign of the cross on her forehead, chest, left shoulder, and then right shoulder. When we sat down, the priest spoke a different language and we kneeled and then stood up and then kneeled and then stood up over and over again and everybody prayed the same prayers out loud also over and over again. We never went to Sunday school there because their Sunday school was on a Saturday and Daddy wouldn't allow that either. Mommy told us that the Catholic Church excommunicated her because Daddy wouldn't let us go to catechism.

But no matter how many times we had been told about lying, and I was really trying not to do bad things that I wouldn't have to lie about, Moke finally pushed Daddy to a point where all of his rules about not physically hurting us made no difference to him, and he maybe didn't intend to kill us but certainly threaten us to make us feel that we were going to die.

We sat down at the dinner table one night, the same table that Daddy had been using to paint a clear liquid on the backs of cards, and there were small glasses at our places with wine in them. Wine with dinner wasn't unusual but we usually were allowed to drink it with dinner when we had company from Mommy's side of the family, which actually wasn't all that often. When we ate at Nana's house, she would sometimes pour us a little wine then fill the rest of the glass with water so that we didn't feel left out. Plus, Italians drank wine with dinner. It was just something they did. I never noticed bad behavior or drunkenness because when dinner was over, they didn't drink anymore wine. As Mommy placed serving dishes on the table, Daddy, already seated, watched us sit down. Something was wrong. I could feel something creepy that gave me a chill, but I didn't know what it was. Mommy finally sat down and we said grace. I took a sip of wine just to make sure that there wasn't a mistake. No water. Just straight wine. Mommy and Daddy didn't speak so we didn't talk either and Cindy wasn't home to break the silence with her nonstop chattering. Maybe they were in a fight again. Not likely though because fighting usually meant that their

mouths moved and loud noises came out. We had witnessed enough fights that fighting was probably not what was happening.

When we were finished eating dinner, Daddy said, “You guys stay at the table, I want to talk to you.” Mommy cleared the table without our help. She seemed to be in on whatever it was that Daddy wanted to talk to us about. Daddy got up and picked up a small can from the counter and set it on the table in front of Moke and me. The sardine can had been opened a little bit. Daddy just stood there and stared at us. I looked up at him wondering what was next.

“Who opened this?” he asked.

I shook my head. “I don’t know, Daddy,” I said.

“I asked who opened this. I don’t want to hear ‘I don’t know, Daddy,’” as he tipped his head back and forth imitating me and mocking my voice.

No one spoke for what seemed like ten or twelve hours. His stares burned into us like hot coals. I had to look down at the can to escape. Our wine glasses were still sitting in front of us so I took a sip. The bitterness burned my throat. I thought about the flies on top of Irma’s dad’s wine and hoped that this wine was not made the same way.

“So no one opened this can?” He asked in a low voice, his head hanging low now.

“I didn’t,” Moke said indignantly.

“Well someone did and I know I didn’t. Your mother didn’t and now the two of you say that you didn’t. The only other person is your sister, and she isn’t

here, and she is too little to climb on the sink. Somebody opened this can of sardines. Now which one of you did it?" Daddy's voice became really loud this time.

"I know which one of you opened this can and I want that person to tell me the truth," he said as he was opening the drawer with all of the silverware and knives. He pushed the utensils around until he could find the knife he was looking for. The knife he pulled out was at least forty or fifty inches long and had a sharp tip on the end. I didn't recognize it. I knew for sure that it wasn't a knife we were allowed to use when we helped Mommy cut up vegetables.

"I know which one of you opened this can of sardines and I want both of you to come over here and put your fingers on the cutting board so I can cut off the finger of the person who opened this can."

Oh please somebody tell me this is just a bad dream, I thought. Moke and I got up from the table and walked over to the cutting board. My legs were shaking and I could barely walk.

"Now put your fingers on the cutting board." He grabbed my hand and placed my pointing finger on the cutting board. He looked at me and said, "Leave your finger right there." He did the same thing to Moke. "You have one more chance to tell me the truth," he said as he raised the long knife high over his head. And with that last and final threat, Moke pulled his finger away from the cutting board and pulled it tightly to his chest. I began to cry while Daddy lectured Moke about lying.

Chapter II

Home for the Holidays

Just before second grade ended my teacher wanted to know who would be coming back to Jefferson for the third grade and who would be going to another school. She asked the ones who were not coming back to raise their hands so I raised my hand. We had lived in the house on Hobson the whole year and now it was time to move out of our house and go to another school. I had attended kindergarten at Horace Cureton Elementary School near Nana's house and then went to first grade at Willow Glen Elementary blocks away from Grandma Wagle's and now second grade was almost finished so it was time to go to a new school. It all made perfect sense to me.

But when Daddy somehow found out that I had told my teacher we were moving. It made no sense to him. "Why would you tell your teacher something like that?" Daddy had a way of asking questions that made me feel like a stupid idiot. It felt like he had asked, "How could you be so stupid? When will you ever just know how to answer questions? Why aren't you as smart as I am?"

"I don't know. We move every year Daddy. Aren't we moving again this year?" I asked.

"No. We're not," he said in his meanest voice.

"But we always move every year," I whined.

"Well this year is different. We're staying until I say we're moving. Do you understand?" He asked.

No, I didn't understand why this was even his decision. Mommy worked and he went out at night dressed up like a poor old man. *Why was this his decision?* I wondered. I didn't dare ask. He scared me. I didn't want him to be mad at me again.

But when third grade was over, Mrs. Young, my third grade teacher asked us who would be going to the fourth grade at Jefferson, and who would be going to another school I raised my hand—again. And then I raised my hand again when fourth grade came to an end and Mrs. Morrison asked us who was leaving. Daddy didn't find out either of those times though because he had finally moved to Los Angeles and unless we went to visit him in the summer time, we hardly ever saw him unless it was Christmas, Easter, or maybe Grandma's birthday.

It wasn't that I didn't like going to Jefferson although I did think that Mrs. Morrison was the meanest teacher I had had so far. She never remembered my name and I couldn't figure out how someone could see me every single day and never remember my name. She remembered the other kid's names but not mine.

Mrs. Young was like Grandma Wagle. She was old and kind. She taught us about making margins on our papers before we took a spelling test or wrote a story, and she taught us how to spell correctly. She even taught us the different ways of spelling words like theater and theatre. She taught us about synonyms and she told us stories, and she helped us pronounce words correctly too, and

she always remembered my name, and I really missed her when I went into the fourth grade.

The best part of going to Jefferson school was that we celebrated May Day. May Day at Horace Cureton had been just putting some dirt in a milk carton, sticking a flower in the dirt, (hoping it wouldn't die before I got home) and leaving it on the porch, after ringing the door bell at our house, and running away. When Aunt Pat answered the door, she laughed and acted surprised and hugged me. But at Jefferson, we started planning and practicing May Day in March. We made costumes out of crepe paper; the girls wore bright colored aprons and the boys wore vests. We practiced weaving around each other and the imaginary May Pole until we got the steps down perfectly, and then, finally, on May first, we were each given our one thousand-feet-long braided piece of crepe paper (I was never really good at math).

On May first, we weaved and danced around the May pole until it became just one long pole with millions of rainbow colors streaming all the way down the pole. The teachers and parents clapped and screamed excitedly for us, except my parents. They weren't there. Mommy had to work and Daddy would never come to something where he would have to talk to other parents. Some of the parents brought foods from other countries and the cafeteria served hot dogs—not that anyone was hungry because we were all way too excited to eat. We especially liked this day because it meant that school would soon be out for the whole summer.

That year, Mommy had made friends with a woman named Donna Soper. She worked with Donna at Plymouth City. Donna had two little girls: Diana and Rhonda. Diana was a year younger than me and Rhonda was Cindy's age. Their Daddy lived in Kansas and they visited him in the summer. Donna started dropping them off at our church at the same time we got dropped off. Sometimes Donna and Mommy would go out together and leave me to take care of all of us. Donna also took us over to their boss's house in Willow Glen to swim in the swimming pool in the summer when the Bonasera family was on vacation. We had to sneak through the gate and be very quiet so that the neighbors didn't hear us, but Donna told us not to worry because the Bonaseras knew that we were going to use their pool. Donna and Mommy would also drop the five of us off at the Garden Theater in Willow Glen to watch movies—double features. I was the oldest so I had to make sure no one got away.

And Mommy started going out with a man that year. We actually never met him because she never brought him home when we were awake. We did hear his voice one night though. Moke and I woke up to two men shouting at each other and Mommy begging one of them to leave. We got out of bed quietly and stood in the hallway to find out what was going on just in time for Daddy to plow through the door holding Mommy by the arm. Daddy yelled at us to go back to bed and then they started yelling at each other so much that we couldn't sleep because we were too scared. Nana came to rescue us and take Moke and me home with her, but then in the middle of all the commotion Daddy decided that he

wasn't going to let Nana take us. Then Moke ran out to Nana's car and I got caught in the middle of Daddy and Nana. They each had ahold of one arm and they were pulling me like I was the rope in a tug of war. I was screaming and begging them to let go of me. Nana finally let go and hit Daddy across the side of his head with her great big purse. Daddy had no choice but to let go of my arm when he was trying to duck, but Nana kept clobbering him with her purse until she was sure that he wouldn't try to hold onto me anymore. That was the first time I saw Nana really mad and show Daddy how mean she could be. Before we left, she yelled at Daddy and Mommy and told them that she didn't care what they did to each other, but they were not going to do it in front of her grandchildren.

The next day, Mommy and Daddy picked us up at Nana's. Daddy told me he was sorry and that he would never do that again. He stayed with us for a month or so until he got bored and left. This time we didn't hear him say that he was going out for a pack of cigarettes or to see a man about a horse. He just left.

Moke and I started the new school year: me in the fourth grade and Moke in the second, without new school clothes, but Daddy once again made his guest appearance just in time to buy us what we needed except for one problem—he didn't have any money, which was why he came home. We had taken a train to Los Angeles during the summer and he seemed to have plenty of money to take us to Disneyland and out for fancy dinners, but now he was broke and he didn't

have anywhere to go, so not only would our lives be disrupted again, we wouldn't get anything for having to put up with him. At least that's what Mommy said every time he left, "Well, at least we don't have to put up with him."

I was almost as tall as Mommy who stood a whole five feet two, and she said that "It will not be long before we can share our clothes," but right now the skirts I had worn in the third grade were too short and my blouses had become painfully tight around my arms and waist. I needed clothes that fit, and I wanted something new like my girlfriends. I knew that even after months of being away Daddy still felt badly about the fight he and Mommy had had and him pulling on my arm with Nana so I thought this might be a good time to ask him for money.

Everyone at school was talking about what they were going to be for Halloween next month, and I thought that Moke and I might even get store-bought costumes out of him. Not like the costumes he had bought us when I was in the second grade—the big face Humpty Dumpty costumes, when we couldn't see where we were going and everybody laughed at us. The Humpty Dumpty costumes that made us trip over everything in front of us all day long costumes. We had gotten those costumes, along with our school clothes, on a football bet Daddy had won. But when Mommy saw that we couldn't walk without tripping, she helped us make costumes to go out and trick or treat in. When Daddy came home just in time to see us walk out the door, he made a big fuss.

"Where are the Humpty Dumpty costumes I bought you?" He asked as he looked back and forth at Moke and me.

Mommy answered him with “They had a difficult time walking in them at school. They couldn’t see out of the eye holes and I didn’t want them to get hurt tonight, so I pulled some things together for them we had around the house.”

“Why didn’t you do that in the first place before I spent all that money?” He asked Mommy.

“You kids go. Your dad and I will discuss this while you are trick or treating,” Mommy said.

“No, no, no,” Daddy said. “We will talk about it now.” He looked at Moke and asked, “What are you supposed to be Moke?”

“I am Huckleberry Finn,” Moke said pumping out his chest and carrying his stick a little higher.

Daddy turned to look at me and said, “How bout you Annie?”

“I am a cheerleader.” I wore one of my short tight blue plaid skirts and a white blouse. Mommy put some of her red lipstick on my lips and smeared some of the lipstick on my cheeks. I really looked more like Raggedy Ann than a cheerleader, but I was trying to look grown up so she also painted eyeliner under my eyes.

“Why are you wearing make up?” Daddy asked me.

I wanted to run away now. I knew by the way he sounded that our Halloween was ruined. I ran into the bedroom crying.

For last year’s costume, Daddy was in Los Angeles. We found big long sticks from the yard that was behind the fence in back of our house, and we filled

bandanas with newspaper that our neighbor gave us and tied the scarves to the stick. Then we found some old pants that Mommy wore around the house and kept them up with belts. We smudged our faces with mud and became the hobos that sometimes knocked on our door offering to mow our lawn for a sandwich.

Mommy and Daddy kept yelling at each other. Mommy kept saying the word “gambling” like it was a bad word. I wasn’t sure what gambling was, but I knew Mommy didn’t like it, because I heard them arguing about it. Mommy demanded that Daddy stop gambling and that he go to work for Grandpa Wagle painting houses. This argument always led to the pacing. Whenever Daddy felt trapped he would pace. Like a trapped animal in a tiny cage, he walked back and forth in the kitchen. He would rub his right hand across his mouth and then both hands would cover his eyes and then he would slick back his black hair all in one motion. He had left all of his fancy clothes in his apartment in Gardena and all he had to wear were the Frisco jeans he had left here and an old white tee shirt. His pacing went on for hours sometimes and this particular day I waited until I couldn’t hear the sound of his feet anymore and he sat exhausted, legs spread apart, head in his hands, with his elbows on the kitchen table.

I came to the table wearing my tightest dress so that he could see how I looked in it. This dress was one of two. It was polished light blue cotton with tiny blue flowers. Not only was it too small, it was also for a little girl—not a big girl like me—not a fourth grader. Grandma Wagle had made it for me at least two

years ago. The elastic around the arms was so tight that it made my arms red and itchy.

"Daddy, I need some money. Mommy said that if you go to work for Grandpa Wagle that you could make enough money to give me for school clothes."

He looked up at me as if he didn't see me, like I hadn't just asked him for something. He stared at me and then he said, "You broads are all alike. That's all you women do is ask for money." *You broads are all alike? What did that mean?* I wondered. I stood quietly for a minute. I was confused. I had heard him say this to Mommy but never to me. I didn't even know what a broad was and why they were all alike. I just remember Mommy raising her hand to slap him during one of their fights when he had said it to her. He had caught her wrist just in time.

Mommy looked tired when Daddy was home. She didn't talk to us as much when he was there. She didn't ask us to help her anymore. She went to work, and she came home and finished the dinner that I had learned to start after I got home from school. After dinner, Daddy would say, "Help your mother with the dishes."

I knew this time that she wanted him to leave. She had a job, and even though she didn't have the money to buy school clothes, she did make enough money to pay the rent and the PG&E bill and pay for food. For her to try to hit

him meant that she had finally had enough of him. And to make things worse, I had started talking back to him and asking him for things.

I didn't know what to say to him. *Should I slap him?* I wondered. His eyes looked scary, and he sucked air through his middle top false teeth daring me to say anything else. I hated when he sucked on his teeth. For me, it said that he didn't care, that he didn't like me, that he thought I was ugly.

"I don't know why you need to buy new clothes. Your grandmother makes you beautiful clothes," he whined.

I waited to answer. *Think before you speak, Annie. Think before you speak. Children should be seen and not heard. I shouldn't even be talking at all.* "Grandma made me this dress, and it is too short and the sleeves are too tight." I didn't mean to sound so curt. I had picked this up from watching Shirley Temple movies. Shirley was outspoken and always got her way if she put her hands on her hips and pouted her lips out. I thought I could behave the same way and get what I wanted. The back of my legs stuck to the chair as I stood up to show him how short the dress had gotten and how the sleeves had left red marks on my arms. I could hear my skin peeling away from the plastic. I was quieter this time. "This is a summer dress Daddy. I don't have anything to wear when it gets cold. My sweaters are even too small." I started pleading, and my throat made cracking noises. I didn't want him to see me cry like a little crybaby, but it was too late. The tears came like the water pipe that had burst in the garage last

year. I couldn't stop them from pouring down my face and if I didn't look ugly before, I sure did now.

The next day, Moke and I stood side-by-side staring at our red Plymouth on the corner of San Pedro and Hobson, a block away from our duplex. We were on our way to school. Mommy had bought this car from her boss and she said that he gave her a "really good deal." Mr. Bonasera took the money right out of her paychecks each month to make the payments, and now the car that Mommy was paying for with her own money so she didn't have to take the bus to work was smashed into the telephone pole like a big rotten tomato, kitty-corner from our school.

Moke wasn't a talker—not like Cindy. Moke was the quiet one—the middle child—the boy between two girls. One time I heard Mommy tell Nana "still waters run deep." She was talking about Moke. I didn't know what that meant. Moke and I tolerated each other, but there really wasn't much to say about our parents anyway. They just were. Cindy talked too much. The song "You Talk too Much" came out that year and we all decided that Chubby Checker must know Cindy somehow and wrote this song especially for her. Cindy had to tell us every detail of who said what and how they looked when they said what and then what the other person said and how they looked when they said whatever they said. No one could talk when Cindy was around. When she watched a television show, she had to give us the same descriptions of everything that had gone on. There was no need for us to even watch television anymore with Cindy around.

And for the last year she was home full time. She went to kindergarten at Jefferson from nine until noon and a neighbor watched her until Moke and I got home at 3:30. Moke and I started school at 8:30 so Cindy wasn't with Moke and me when we saw Mommy's car. I wondered how Mommy would get to work today. *Did she even know that the car was down the street and not in our driveway?*

We stepped around the car and ran across the street to go to school. A bunch of kids were standing behind the fence looking at the car. We walked to the opening in the fence and then ran across the play yard. When we got out of school that afternoon, the car was gone. It was parked in our driveway with a big dent in the front fender. Daddy was still in bed sleeping and Cindy was at the neighbor's house. I started dinner. Mommy came home late because she had to take the bus. When we sat down to eat she said, "Daddy gave me money this morning to buy you both school clothes."

I don't know why I thought that this Christmas would be any different than any other Christmas, maybe because I was in the fourth grade now. Maybe it was because Daddy was gone so much that this year I was hoping that he wouldn't come home at all and we could have a Christmas without fighting for once.

Last Christmas Eve Mommy and Daddy got into a fight on the way to church, and Daddy tried to push Mommy out of our car. Moke and I were in the back seat screaming for Mommy and pulling on her arm to try to keep her in the

car. When we got to church Mommy said, “I have to pull myself together,” and she left us with Daddy and she went to the bathroom. Daddy sent us into the church by ourselves. Cindy sat with Grandma and Grandpa while Moke and I, arriving just in time, said our Bible verses in front of the whole church, and then I went to sit with the choir.

Maybe this Christmas Eve would be different. It began like any other Christmas Eve we had celebrated in about the last four or five years. Mommy had wrapped our presents the night before and placed them around the tree. After morning cartoons, Moke and Cindy and I circled the Christmas tree like three little bumblebees, lightly touching our packages as we shook and listened, and then shook and listened some more, with more intent shaking, and then more listening for any sounds that would tell us that we actually got something we had asked for.

At three o’clock we watched our Santa Claus show. Santa wore a bright red suit with a wide black belt. He had bright red rosy cheeks like when I stayed out in the sun too long and got sunburned. His fluffy white beard looked like cotton candy except it wasn’t pink. His voice was friendly and warm like Grandpa Wagle’s. Santa somehow became the perfect father for the three of us on those afternoons just before Christmas. At four o’clock Mommy said, “It’s time for your baths.” And then we all heard what I did not want to hear, “Daddy will be here at five o’clock, so hop to it.” *Daddy?*

“Okay, Mommy.” We knew better than to argue or question.

This was the one afternoon in the whole year that we did not fool around in the bathtub. The quicker we got ready the sooner we could open our presents. This was the first year that Mommy didn't make Cindy and me wear identical outfits. Grandma knew that I didn't like ruffles and lace anymore so she made me a simple sleeveless dress out of white brocade with no ruffles anywhere and a small jacket out of the same material. Cindy still fit into the polished cotton dress with little blue flowers that Grandma had made her last year that was identical to mine. We both wore shiny black patent leather shoes and navy blue wool coats, also made by Grandma. Mommy left a new pair of black slacks, a white collared shirt, a black bow tie, and a black sport coat on Moke's bed. I often wondered where the money came from to buy his clothes since we barely had enough money for groceries.

When the front door opened, Mommy had a tight hold on my ponytail painfully pulling and stretching my hair so she could get every last strand into the rubber band. We had not seen Daddy in a couple of months, and suddenly, there he was in our living room, kissing Mommy, and taking charge as if he had never left.

"What's doin', Annie Joy?" He asked.

I smiled and then winced with pain, "ouch, Mommy, stop," I cried as she continued to pull my head back and forth. But before I could answer Daddy's question Cindy ran clumsily around the corner with her fat little legs and grabbed one of Daddy's legs with both of her arms.

I didn't like my little sister anymore. No one paid attention to me when Cindy came home. Cindy wasn't the Cinderella I had hoped for. Her voice was loud and she needed constant attention. A better name for her would have been Chatty Cathy. Moke and I lived by our father's rules: Children should speak when spoken to, children should be seen and not heard, children should think before speaking.

"Fine." I said softly. Daddy didn't hear me. No one heard me.

Daddy snatched Cindy, who was now screaming, into his arms. She held onto his neck with her tightest squeeze and kissed him hard on the cheek. And like I said the rules Moke and I had grown up with did not apply to Cindy.

Moke stood off to the side quietly watching Cindy and Daddy.

"Hey Moke, what's doin'?" Daddy reached his right hand out to Moke, his long fingers around Moke's hand made it disappear. No hugs and kisses for Moke. He was a boy. Boys didn't get hugs and kisses.

With my hair tightly in place, Cindy's was already a mess, Mommy ran for the hairspray to try to slick her hair down. Cindy wasn't in the church production anyway, and by the time the evening was half way through, her hair, now down to the back of her knees, looked like Rapunzel's.

Daddy helped Mommy with her coat. I knew that something was different between them and all I wanted for Christmas right now was for him not to move back home again. But I reminded myself that he had come back so many times

before that he would soon be gone. *He was just on his good behavior because it was Christmas*, I told myself.

Moke and I walked stiffly to the car, unused to being dressed up, not wanting anything to mess us up or to get us dirty. Daddy brought Grandpa Wagle's station wagon—a Ford Fairlane. I still missed Grandpa's Woody that he had sold to buy a newer car so we could travel to North Dakota in when I was six. I had a hard time liking this green and white car that looked like a spaceship. It didn't have leather seats like the Woody and it didn't smell like Grandpa's Aqua Velva yet.

First Covenant Church held a Christmas celebration every year on Christmas Eve that started promptly at six o'clock. First, a short sermon and then the play began with Mary and Joseph's trip to Bethlehem, the birth of the baby Jesus and the Three Wise Men visiting the baby Jesus with gifts. I sang in the choir and Moke usually had a part in the children's play. When I was seven, I played Mary and Moke was a Wise Man. Daddy and Grandma and Grandpa always came to see our program. On this particular night, when the service was over, everyone gathered at the back of the church so they could tell all of the kids what a good job they had done. Daddy was well known to most of the parishioners as "the black sheep" of our family. I had overheard these words many times during my life with the Covenants. One by one, they came up and shook Daddy's hand. I think they were just curious. They didn't approve of him not going to church. Daddy stood quietly next to Mommy with his hands folded in

front of him. Daddy looked nervous and sweaty. He only shook hands and talked to people who came up to him.

Christmas Eve was quiet at Grandma and Grandpa's house. It was a celebration of Jesus's birth, which included the traditional Norwegian foods for our Christmas Eve dinner. Grandma made a fish called Lutefisk. Daddy explained to us one time why Lutefisk stunk so bad that it made the insides of our noses pinch. "Lutefisk is a codfish that has been soaked in water for about five days to get all the salt out. Then they soak it in water and lye for two more days and then another four days with just water. And then they hang the Lutefisk out on the clothesline to dry out." When Grandma started melting the butter to cook it Moke and I had to go out in the garage with Uncle John. We never did eat Lutefisk and no one cared probably because there was more for them to eat.

Grandma also made Lefse. Lefse was a large tortilla made out of mashed potatoes. We smeared it with butter and sprinkled brown sugar on it and then rolled it up like a big fat cigar. This was our favorite desert. Grandma would often times make Lefse during the year when she had leftover potatoes. And then there was Kumle, a large heavy potato dumpling with a piece of pork in the middle—our prize after getting through this gummy sticky dinner that always gave me a stomach ache. I liked it better the next day when Grandma would cut it up in little pieces and fry it in lard. The truth was that it really didn't matter what we ate at Grandma's house, because Nana would have plenty to eat when we

got to her house. This was not a finish everything on your plate, there are children starving in Africa night.

After dinner we sang Christmas hymns. "Oh Little Town of Bethlehem," "Away in a Manger," (my favorite), "Silent Night" and then Grandpa Wagle said a prayer and finally Moke and I recited the Bible verses that we had said in church before we could open our gifts. Grandma called these verses our "Christmas pieces." She would have us stand in front of the fireplace in our new Christmas clothes and make everyone be quiet and listen. No one was allowed to hang out in the kitchen or the garage. Uncle John, Uncle Dave, Auntie Ona and her husband Uncle Don, and Daddy all had to come into the living room and listen to us. Then a little while later, Daddy would come in dressed like Santa Claus. I believed in Santa Claus, but I always knew this Santa Claus was Daddy because Daddy had two red marks on the left side of his nose and so did this Santa Claus.

There were socks, shirts, ties, homemade cookies, pajamas, and games. A nurse book from my favorite collection always appeared in Santa's sack every year. Sometimes I got a paint-by-number kit or a stitching kit. Grandma had taught me how to crochet and knit as early as five, so by the time I turned nine I could make doilies large enough to go under the lamps and some of Grandma's knickknacks.

The gift that we couldn't let go of once we had it in our hands; the toy that we couldn't stop playing with was always the cherished metal slinky. We needed

a new one every year because by March it turned into a tangled, jumbled mess that had to be thrown out. The slinky walked down stairs all by itself. It stepped off the backs of couches and made its way off of our beds with a simple twist of the wrist. This metal wonder amazingly would come back to its original form and sit stacked and straight after its unique performance.

Wrapping paper and ribbon seemed to disappear from view as Grandma Wagle turned into a large human vacuum cleaner snatching up what would soon become to her an unsightly mess. This process meant that the evening was now over, and like clockwork, the phone rang just as she grabbed the last piece of paper.

"Where are you guys?" Nana asked Mommy impatiently.

"We're coming Mom. We're almost finished," Mommy said with her most calming voice as if she were talking to a child.

Nana lived in the east foothills of San Jose off of Alum Rock Avenue. In 1960, the freeway from Nevada Avenue off of Lincoln Avenue in Willow Glen, to Cragmont Avenue, did not exist so we had plenty of time to take catnaps in the car and be wide awake for the rest of our big night. Daddy's solemn performance for church, as well as at Grandma and Grandpa's was flawless this year, and it was now time for him to start thinking about his game plan.

Nana screamed when she saw us, and she kissed our faces all over with her wet juicy garlicy lips. Grandma Wagle smelled like sugar cookies and coffee

and sometimes peppermint, but Nana made us hungry for spaghetti and meatballs when she kissed us. So many people had crowded into Nana's house that there was no place for everyone to sit down at the same time. My aunts and uncles stood with their paper plates eating Italian sausage sandwiches.

Moke and I couldn't wait for Nana's stuffed rolls to come out of the oven. I had helped Nana make them only a few days ago. Nana showed me how to cut into the top of the small roll, only part way, just enough to make a lid that flapped over to keep the stuffing in. Then I carefully pulled out the bread on the inside with my fingers. This made a wide-open space to spoon in the stuffing. The stuffing was a mixture of chopped boiled eggs, diced onions, sliced black olives, Velveeta cheese, and tomato sauce. Once we were finished stuffing them, we wrapped each one with tin foil and then put them all in the refrigerator to wait for Christmas Eve. Nana made this hot, cheesy, gooey treat only once a year. And while we would never be served wine at Grandma Wagle's house, Nana poured us each a watered down glass of dark red wine she called Dago Red.

After we stuffed ourselves and didn't think we could eat another bite, Nana started the Sfingis, the Italian's version of a donut made out of a sweet batter, deep-fried in oil, stacked like a Christmas tree on a plate, and then sprinkled with powdered sugar.

And now that Daddy had arrived, the adults excitedly began to set up their poker game on the kitchen table. They danced around the table, getting out all of the loose change they had saved up in canning jars over the course of a year.

They each spilled a little bit of their change in front of them as they busied themselves separating the pennies from the nickels, seated in their lucky seats, with their lucky sweaters and shirts, shoulders hunched, anticipating their big wins for the night. Their faces filled with hope that they might be fifty cents richer by the end of the evening.

Although I never took much interest in gambling, I learned from watching that the card deck passed clockwise around the table, giving each person a chance to deal. With deck in hand, the new dealer had the power to call out his or her chosen game: Five Card Draw, Five Card Stud, and Seven Card Stud No Peeky. (I loved the sound of 'no peeky.')

Their personalities changed from loving, kissing aunts and uncles to serious poker players. Their bellies full from dinner and Sfingis, they were now ready to get down to some intense thought before we were allowed to open our Christmas presents at midnight. No one brought up the fact that Daddy had cheated them out of their money last year, and the year before that, and the year before that, and then gave it back to them when the evening was over. He had hooked each one of them like fish that just kept biting the same old stale bait. Daddy had promised them last Christmas that he would never cheat again, and they believed him. Somehow, they just couldn't remember that he had made this same promise on Christmas Day for at least the last four years that I could remember.

While the adults played poker, Nana played records like *Rock Around the Clock*, Bobby Darin's *Splish Splash*, and Brenda Lee's *Rockin Around the Christmas Tree* while she taught us how to Jitter Bug. Uncle Jack would knock at the front door around midnight with his Santa Claus suit on and a sack full of toys. In the same way that I knew Daddy by the two marks on his nose, I knew Uncle Jack by his black shoes.

The living room turned into wall-to-wall gifts with wrapping paper everywhere, scotch tape sticking to our feet, the carpet wallpapered from end to end with boxes, wrapping paper, and curly ribbon. There were musical bells, sewing kits, boxing gloves, hammers, pop guns, shoeshine kits, a kitchen with a real stove for cooking and an oven for baking, baseball bats and balls, a basketball hoop, Tinker Toys, and ironing boards with irons that really turned on. The scene was nothing like Grandma's house where she kept a paper bag close to throw all of the wrapping paper away, or fold up the large pieces to be used again.

While we played with our toys, the adults went back to their poker game. The stress now showed on their faces. Visions of hope for a secure future had dissipated with almost every hand, as Daddy once again became the evening's winner. His cheating had paid off and it was now time for the squabbling to begin. My heart started to beat more quickly in anticipation for what I knew was about to happen when Daddy would tell them we were leaving, and he would find

himself faced with an angry mob ready to lynch us before we could reach the front door.

When I finally left my toys sprawled out on the living room floor, it was one o'clock Christmas morning. I watched Moke and our cousins, stand back from their Tinker Toys admiring the lopsided Ferris wheel they had just put together so carefully. Mommy had fallen asleep on the couch just before dinner, missing the entire poker game and Uncle Jack playing Santa Claus. Even with everyone standing, she still had a way of finding a space where she could sleep. I walked into the kitchen still dressed in my fancy church clothes, messy and sweaty from the dancing and playing. I stood quietly next to Daddy who always sat at the head of the table. The deck had now come around the table to him for his turn to shuffle. He touched the deck with his fingertips, shuffling the cards perfectly as each card slapped down on the other. *Had he marked this deck*? I wondered. I looked hard to see if there were any smudges or lines on the backs of the cards. He told Moke and me that his card tricks were "magic," but I knew better.

I looked around the table at my aunts, uncles, and my great grandfather—their faces anticipating the next hand. I thought about the afternoon I had come home from school and saw Daddy marking a deck of cards. I didn't know what he was doing at the time. I just knew that something wasn't right. More than two years had gone by since then, but I remembered the details so clearly as if it had just happened.

Daddy placed the deck face down to his right in front of Great Grandpa Lonero. Grandpa leaned on his cane to split the deck in half and then set it back down on the table. Great Grandpa made the cut and the deal could now begin. The cards flew out of Daddy's hands like soft feathers, each card landing directly in front of his victims. I could feel my eyelids getting heavy as I watched them play this game so intently. I knew not to bother Daddy, but I was tired. I placed my fingers on the edge of the table making a pillow for my head.

"I'm tired, Daddy," I said softly so no one could hear me except him.

"Okay, honey, we're leaving soon." Daddy seemed nicer to us this trip, kind of like he really was sorry. *Maybe things would be different this time.*

"Last hand," Daddy snapped. "Five Card Stud, Deuces Wild. The kids are tired."

"Oh come on Danny," Aunt Rose said impatiently. "The kids can sleep on the couch. We're just getting started. Give us a chance to win back our money."

"No," Daddy said with defiance. "We're gonna take off after this hand. I'm tired too."

Moke, who had begun the evening with his dapper look, now had his shirt hanging out and was shoeless as he tripped over the length of his pants and climbed into Aunt Pat's open arms. One by one, the kids, nervous over the shouting, made their way into the kitchen.

Nana looked around at all of us, "Why don't you kids go and get into your pajamas. I'll fix you a little snack."

When the hand had been played out, the winner pulled all of the pennies and nickels toward him and then broke the money into seven piles. Daddy slid the piles in front of each of them, making his way around the table. Here," he said. "I was just practicin'."

They all jumped up from their chairs, yelling at Daddy. It was hard to know who was saying what. "You can't do that. You promised us a fair game. You said you wouldn't cheat this time, Danny. You promised."

"Yea, well I lied," Daddy said scooping up Moke from Aunt Pat.

"Oh fongulu you, you bastard!!" Aunt Pat yelled.

So the night that we celebrated the birth of our baby Jesus, who had come to earth to save us sinners, the Italians were yelling "fongulu you" at Daddy as he headed for the front door. Nana told me one time that fongulu you meant I hate you, you are a liar and a thief and we hope you die, in Italian.

Aunt Rose and Grandpa Lonero chimed in with Aunt Pat and then they all made Italian arm gestures—right hand over left upper arm, which meant the same thing.

Mommy woke up from her long winter's nap to all of the commotion as she came face to face with Daddy. While Mommy had fallen asleep on the couch, Daddy had cheated my great-grandfather, and my aunts and uncles out of all of their money. Then, and this happened every year until I turned ten, he would give them back all of their money, which would start a big fight. The loud voices

would wake Mommy, and we would leave only to come back the next day for dinner and all was forgotten.

"You cheated again?" Mommy asked. Her face filled with disappointment.

"Get Cindy, we're leavin'," Daddy ordered her.

I followed Mommy to Nana's room to collect Cindy.

"Mommy, what about our presents?" I said.

"It's okay honey. Don't worry. We'll be back tomorrow and all of this will be forgotten. You know that, Annie."

I could hear the bickering continue, as I walked back into the kitchen. My aunts and uncles continued to question Daddy, "Why would you do this to us again, Danny? You know we just like to play an honest game. It's Christmas Eve for Christ's sake."

Daddy stood impatiently listening to their pleas, and then he said nonchalantly, "I really don't wanna hear it. If you're gonna be suckers, be quiet ones. Merry Christmas. See you all tomorrow."

On the way home a policeman stopped us. Daddy rode in the police car with the policeman, and Mommy drove us home in the car with the police following her home. Daddy didn't come in because the police brought him to jail.

Chapter III

Happy Birthday To Me

We said goodbye to our little duplex and all of our friends of the past three years during the summer that I celebrated my tenth birthday. We moved from the duplex to a real house on Corlista Drive off of Fruitdale Avenue on the outskirts of Willow Glen. Mom called it "The West Side of Town," as if it were sacred ground. As if by moving to "The West Side of Town," she was saving us from growing up anywhere else that is not the west side, and that people who grow up on the west side have a much better shot at success than those who grow up anywhere else. Grandma and Grandpa Wagle had just bought a home in Saratoga, and Nana had moved to an apartment with a swimming pool on the east side of San Jose. Mom wanted us to live on the west side of San Jose now. She said that problems were occurring on the east side that she didn't want her children to be exposed to. Even as early as 1961 she could see trouble brewing on the east side, and she made it known that Mickey, Cindy, and I would not be subjected to those kinds of problems. Whatever those problems were specifically, she did not share with us.

Our new house belonged to Jerry Houser, an attorney in San Jose and a friend of my Uncle Dave. Jerry went to Willow Glen High School with Uncle Dave. So Jerry being a family friend meant that he would rent the house to us for a hundred dollars a month in the hopes that we would at least take good care of the place. And we did—sort of. Mom and I at least took good care of the inside

of the house, but Mickey, (we called Moke Mickey now) in charge of mowing the lawn, was distracted by all of the kids he had to play with in the neighborhood. Our house quickly became the rattiest looking house on the block.

When we moved in, the house felt like a mansion to us with a fresh coat of forest green paint and white shutters, and an old walnut tree right in the middle of the front lawn—a real home for just us—the four of us. This was our house. Not a house where Daddy could come and go as he pleased. The back of the house had a small concrete patio and then a drop down with lots of weeds and no fence across the back of the house. This meant that we could walk straight through to the next block, which led us to White Front, a huge department store that sold everything, including groceries, at a discount.

White Front was one of the first large discount stores in the Bay Area. Highway 280 had not been constructed yet so we could walk directly to Moorpark Avenue, where White Front was located about a half-mile-walk from our house. I bought my first skateboard for $2.99 at White Front, and Mom bought groceries there sometimes too.

Our new home had three bedrooms and two bathrooms, living room and dining room and a long galley kitchen with a breakfast room at the end where we ate all of our meals. There was a real hallway with a linen closet and a closet for our coats. And privacy. Cindy and I shared a room and Mickey had his own room.

Daddy wasn't there to help us move this time so it was all up to Mom and me to collect the boxes from the backs of grocery stores, pack them and then help Uncle Jack, Mom's brother, and Uncle Rick, Aunt Pat's husband, load the boxes onto the back of Uncle Jack's truck as we took one truck-load at a time to the new house.

Before anything got packed though, Mom and I made sure that we didn't take anything with us that should be thrown into the garbage, which meant that we would have to organize all of the old photos that had just been tossed into boxes. Some had been placed in albums, but most had been loosely thrown into boxes and stacked on top of each other in the garage. Mom made a big deal out of going through each picture now so we spent our evenings in front of the television sorting and talking about the people who were in these pictures. We came across an album of black and whites, each photo stuck to the album pages with sticky black corner fasteners. I didn't remember seeing these pictures before—five pages of a child's birthday party.

"Whose birthday party is this Mom?" I asked.

Mom took the album from me. "It's your birthday. That's you." She pointed to a little girl wearing a frilly party dress—*clearly not me. I hated frilly clothes*. "You were two here." The dress (probably pink) had short puffy sleeves, secured around each arm with elastic, and I had on white shiny patent leather shoes. Mom pointed to as many of the children as she could remember. They all wore pointed party hats. Even Nana and Grandma Wagle, our

neighbors, Raylene, Uncle Ray, and Aunt Violet, Aunt Pat, Uncle Jack and Aunt Nancy had on pointed party hats.

"This is Jimmy and Johnny Paterson. They lived next door to Nana. They were a couple of years older than you," Mom continued.

"I remember playing with them," I said.

"This little girl's name is Joni (pronounced Johnny) and this is her baby sister Jo. I went to high school with their mother."

"I remember playing with them. A girl named Johnny?" I asked.

"Yea, I can't remember why they did that. Her sister too. I went out with their father a few times when we were in high school. If I had married him, you wouldn't have that cute little nose of yours, but we would be well taken care of. And here's me. I was pregnant with your brother."

"Was Daddy there?"

She turned the page. "Here he is." My dad, tall and slender, stood looking down at all of us with his hands in his pockets. He appeared out of place and he wasn't wearing a pointed party hat.

The next page showed Jimmy Patterson blindfolded with a paper donkey tail in his right hand while Raylene pointed him toward the donkey poster so he could pin the tail as close as possible to the donkey's butt and win a prize if he came the closest. The last few pictures were of all of the children seated at a long table in Nana's garage with me at the head—a big round cake in front of me.

The rest of the album only had blank pages, so I picked up a stack of pictures that were a mixture of black and whites and square photos in color taken with somebody's—not ours—Polaroid camera. Mom watched as I started to finger through them. "Okay, take that stack and do the best you can at separating the years right here on the floor," she said. "We don't have all night to get this done, so try not to dwell on each picture. I'll leave you here to take care of these three boxes. If you see pictures that you don't know who is in the picture, stack those pictures on the coffee table. I will go through them and see which ones we can get rid of." She started to walk out of the room and then she turned to me and said again, "Try to hurry, honey. I really need for you to help me with other more important things." I had become her helper these past few years, the one she could depend on. I was the mother now and she was the father. We had gotten used to our new roles, leaving little room for Daddy.

"Mom," I said.

"What."

"Is Daddy moving into the new house with us?" I asked.

"No, why?" She said.

"Just wondering."

The party looked like it must have been a lot of fun, and I don't remember having a birthday party that Mom didn't make a big deal out of. I also don't remember Daddy not being at any of the parties. He always made his way home from Los Angeles for my birthday as well as for Mickey's. The whole family

showed up. We had cake and ice cream. We played games like the photo of Jimmy Patterson playing Pin the Tail on the Donkey and Button Button Who's Got the Button. And presents—lots of really nice presents.

I began looking for last year's birthday pictures. Last year's birthday when I turned nine stands out for me the most. I still can't quite understand what happened. I mean I get it, but I just don't understand why Daddy thought what he did would be okay. I pulled out another stack of pictures. I had piles everywhere now according to how old I thought Mickey, Cindy, and I were at the time. *Okay, I am getting close. These must be my sixth birthday,* I thought. I stood at the side door of an old yellow farmhouse like a tiny ant compared to the size of the house; I'm wearing pedal pushers and a sleeveless blouse. Grandma and Grandpa, Uncle Martin, Grandpa's brother, and I spent two weeks in Cooperstown, North Dakota in August of 1957 for my sixth birthday. Cindy had been born on January 31, so she was just over six months old when we left. She was so cute that I hated to leave her. Grandma called Uncle Martin my partner on the trip. He tried his best to distract me in the back seat from getting car sick by singing silly songs in Norwegian, but there were times going through the mountains that I just couldn't hold everything back.

I could see the outhouse in the background of this picture. I didn't have to use the outhouse. Great Grandma Wagle let me use her bathroom. Her bathroom had been a coat closet on the first floor near her bedroom so she didn't have to climb the stairs. The closet had a chair in it with a hole cut out of the

wicker seat. There was a bucket under the seat. Uncle Mag took the bucket out as often as needed. If I had to go to the bathroom at night, there was a chamber pot under our bed and all the beds in the house so no one had to wander around in the dark. I slept with Grandma and Grandpa in a bright sunny room upstairs. Before we left Great Grandma's house, Grandma washed the chamber pot really well. Grandma said, "We're going to take this home to your Mommy as a souvenir. She will like it." And she did. Mommy loved the new pot and she immediately found a new purpose for it. It was now a planter where she grew Devil's Ivy.

The next picture was taken at Grandma's cousin's house in Mandan, North Dakota, where we visited on the way to Cooperstown. I am standing in front of a big two-story house with a group of kids. The house has a crab apple tree growing out of an unmowed lawn with lots of shrubs around the lawn. I had never noticed this before, but this house looked very different from the house in Cooperstown, where nothing except weeds seemed to grow everywhere. When we ate lunch, Grandma's cousin placed a big bowl of sweetened crab apples on the table. They had been canned in sugar and dyed red. It was like eating a big bowl of candy.

The rest of the pictures were of other people's houses and the store that Daddy stole a wagonload of apples from when he was five. I remember Grandma saying that it would be funny to bring it back to Daddy. So Mommy got

a chamber pot where people had pooped and peed in every night, and Daddy got a picture of a store where he committed his first crime.

When we left Great Grandma's house, Grandpa Wagle cried and seeing him cry made me cry. "Why is Grandpa crying Grandma?" I asked.

"He's crying because he doesn't know if he will ever see his mother again. She is really old now, Miss Muffet," Grandma said. And Grandpa didn't see her again. She died a few years later before Grandpa could get back home.

And here's a picture of me standing in front of the four presidents' heads.

"Mom," I yelled.

"Yes."

"What's the name of that place in South Dakota with the four presidents' heads?" I asked.

She poked her head around the corner and stood there for a minute to think. "Mount Rushmore."

"Oh yea. Mount Rushmore."

"Come on Annie. You're doin' a good job, but let's get a move on."

"Okay, okay. This is hard work Mom," I said.

Where in the heck is that picture of my new bike and me? I wondered. *I know I saw it before it went into one of these boxes.*

Mickey and I started getting an allowance for doing chores about six months before I turned nine. We received two dollars a week. I had to do all of the

dishes—breakfast and dinner, and Mickey took out the garbage. Making our beds, starting dinner, setting the table, helping Mom with the housework and laundry on Saturdays was what we did as part of a family—our duty as family members. Daddy set up this allowance arrangement on one of his visits home and then left. He told us that he would keep the money safe for us and then give it to us all at once. *All at once when?* I wondered. We didn't know. So we kept track each week of how much he was saving for us. Mickey, the mathematician, kept it all in his head, but I wrote it all down in my diary until I had saved $58.00, which just happened to be a week before my ninth birthday.

The rest of the North Dakota pictures were of my cousins and me mostly standing all straight in a line in the dry weeds in front of their house, which was a short walk across more dry weeds from Great Grandma Wagle's house. There were no fences. I would run as fast as I could from one place to the other so the grasshoppers didn't get me. One time we were taking a ride to visit Grandma's relatives in Sharon and a grasshopper jumped right onto my right arm that I had sticking outside of the car window. I screamed of course, and almost caused Grandpa to run the car off into the dirt, but when Grandma and Grandpa found out what happened, they couldn't stop laughing. City girls were used to soft brown caterpillars that crawled up tree trunks and wouldn't hurt a flea and yellow moths that didn't just jump on people whenever they felt like it. When they stopped laughing, Grandpa had to roll the window up and tell the story that I had

heard over and over since I could remember to distract me from the creepy feeling that the grasshopper had left on my arm that I had now scratched a hole in.

"I used to ski twenty-two miles from our house in Cooperstown to Grandma's house in Sharon," he said. He always told this story with a far away look in his eyes when he talked about his "one true love," and how beautiful she was. I thought that Grandma was beautiful now, but back then her hair wasn't grey, (or blue, or pink when she came from the hair dresser). Grandma's hair had been coal black and she played basketball in high school. Grandma always giggled every time Grandpa told this story like she had never heard it before. "Oh Dad," she would say. "You exaggerate so."

There were a few pictures in this stack that could be my birthday pictures with lots of people in the house in North Dakota. Uncle Mag would come behind me and hold up two fingers behind my head to tease me. Uncle Mag had shell shock from World War II. He was like a big kid who would hide somewhere in the house whenever company came to the house. Company meaning people who were not related—people he wasn't used to seeing all the time. I searched back through the pictures to see if I had missed the water pump on the side of the kitchen sink. I never could bring up water from any of the pumps that everybody in North Dakota used in their kitchens—even if I stood on a chair. Uncle Mag would laugh when he saw me trying so hard and then he help me. He could only make grunting noises at me to show me how to push the pump

down slowly to make the water flow. They didn't have glasses. They drank out of tin juice cans.

When I arrived home from North Dakota, Cindy had turned seven months old and she had a cast on her left foot and leg just below her knee with only her toes sticking out. Cindy was born with a clubfoot and the doctor told Mommy that with a cast and a corrective shoe, her foot would eventually straighten out so she could walk straight. Mommy had been worried that Cindy wouldn't be able to get around, but her cast did not stop my little sister. Mommy told us that when they got home from the doctor, she put Cindy down on the floor and she immediately rolled over on her stomach, pulled her knees up and started crawling. I put the pictures of her, taken before we got home, in a special Cindy stack.

I started on the second box still searching for the pictures of me and my new bike, mostly going through Christmas and Easter pictures of all of us dressed up standing in front of Grandma and Grandpa Wagle's house in Willow Glen. The pictures of the Fourth of July were dark with only the sparklers and the fireworks. Pictures of Nana cooking with the poker players in the background on Christmas Eve. Pictures of Moke and me standing in front of Grandma's fireplace reciting our Bible verses.

"Mom." I yelled running into the kitchen. "Where was this picture taken?"

Mom looked at it and then she said, "It looks like the bridge on Lincoln Avenue across the street from Trio Market. "Oh! That's Sutter's," she said. That's where your dad goes sometimes to play cards in the back room.

"Why are Uncle John and Uncle Dave in the picture?" I asked.

"They used to go down there with your dad." She said.

"To gamble?"

"Yea, your dad taught them how," she said sarcastically. "You ask too many questions Annie. Get back to work."

"I can't find the birthday pictures of me on my new bike," I said.

"They're in there someplace. Keep looking."

"Oooookaaaay," I said.

The summer I turned four, our neighbor Raylene and my auntie Ona, Daddy's sister, went to Hawaii together. The plan was that they would both return in two weeks. Auntie Ona came back in two weeks but Raylene decided to stay longer—like a whole year longer. Raylene Haberly, her brother Pudgy, and her parents, Uncle Ray and Aunt Violet, lived next door to Nana. They were like family to us. Mom says that Aunt Violet was the first person to see me walk when I was nine and a half months old. Raylene was our protector. She loved to take care of Moke and me and when she was gone in Hawaii for such a long time, we really missed her. Mommy told me one time that she tried to take a job in a department store in downtown San Jose when Moke was about two years old and she left him with some woman who babysat other kids. Raylene got so nervous about it that she went over and picked Moke up at lunchtime. She told Mommy that Moke trembled all afternoon. I don't know what the woman did to

make Moke shake like that, but Mommy said that she didn't go back to work the next day. She couldn't leave Moke with anyone she didn't know ever again. When Raylene left for Hawaii, she promised me that she would bring me back a pair of roller skates for my birthday, not intending to stay an entire year. So it just so happened that Raylene got home the day before my fifth birthday and there I was in this next group of pictures opening my roller skates. She helped me attach them to my shoes and tighten them with the roller skate key that she hung around my neck with string. The next picture was of Raylene helping me scoot along Nana's driveway so I didn't fall. Raylene also brought back records that played Hawaiian songs like *Little Grass Shack* and *Lovely Hula Hands*. The next pictures were of Raylene teaching me to do the Hula.

I began to get impatient now. I really wanted to find the pictures of my bike and me so I started just rummaging through the box. *Ah! Here's one.*

"Mom, I found one," I yelled.

"Found what?" She yelled back.

"A picture of me and my bike."

She didn't answer.

I sat with my legs folded under me and stared at the picture of the bike that Daddy had bought me for my ninth birthday with the $58.00 I had earned doing chores. I knew how much the bike cost, because I had asked for this same bike for my next birthday. It was exactly $58.00, which was the exact amount of

money I had saved up. I just didn't know that Daddy would use my allowance money to pay for it and then call it my birthday present. *Happy Birthday to me*, I thought when I found out that my allowance money was completely gone.

I didn't make a big deal out of it. I just didn't forget—ever. I actually thought the offer to give us an allowance was very generous, because before that we got nothing for doing the exact same things. But when we considered, and were constantly reminded by Mom and Daddy too, that there were children in Africa who did not have a roof over their heads and were starving to death, we should feel not only lucky, but also grateful.

So there it was. I stood looking at the picture. Chrome over the tires with a blue frame. My favorite color—blue. Chrome handlebars with blue plastic handles and a basket in front of the handlebars to put all of my stuff in. This bike meant freedom to me. I wondered about our new neighborhood and everywhere else my new bicycle would take me.

Mickey got a bike for his birthday that October too, so we could go places together. He also had to pay for his own birthday present with his allowance money. We were free now, though, and that's all that mattered. When school let out during the summer of our big move to the west, we took off on our bikes and went to the new City Hall building on First Street so we could ride up and down on the elevators. We no longer had to walk to Ryland Park to swim in the pool. We could take our new bikes and go anywhere we wanted to go.

One of our favorite places was Chinatown where Daddy used to play cards. The Chinaman who gave Daddy the boneless chicken still had his restaurant on a side street off of Jackson. We peeked in the window to look at the ducks and chickens hanging behind the counter by their necks with their heads flopping over the string—their webbed feet pulling their bodies down making them shapeless and long. We could also see the door leading to the back room where we thought must be the poker room.

There was a soda fountain on Jackson Street where we bought wax sticks with juice in them for a penny, and another store where we bought toothpicks soaked in hot cinnamon oil. Guadalupe Creek didn't have the same appeal for us now that we had our own wheels.

I placed the pictures back in the three boxes in neat stacks. Unfortunately, we couldn't part with any of them. A lot of the pictures were of Mom and Aunt Pat and Uncle Jack when they were little. I even found one of Mom making her First Communion. She looked so prim and proper with her white dress and shoes and socks. I found a picture of my grandfather and Nana on the beach in Santa Cruz before my grandfather died. They were smiling and happy looking. Nana told me one time that the first ten years of their marriage was pure hell and the last ten years was pure heaven. I was at least able to stack the pictures so they took up only two boxes.

We barely slept the night before we moved, and we were up early to take the beds apart. Once there was nothing left for me to do, I knew I had one more person to say goodbye to.

"Mom," I yelled.

"What Annie."

"I need to go say goodbye to Faith."

"Okay, come right back."

I ran to the end of Hobson and turned right at First Street and then cut through the parking lot of an office building to get onto Empire Street. Faith Lindsey and her family lived in a dilapidated old blue Victorian on the corner of Second Street and Empire. The house had four families living in it. Faith and her grandmother lived in one of the apartments on the second floor. Faith told me one time that her mother wrote the nurse books that I read. When I asked her why the author's last name was different from her last name, she told me that her mother goes by a different name. I never did meet her mother, maybe because I rarely went to her house. It had an odd smell and the only time I had something to eat at her house, my fork had dried food stuck to it. But she was my best friend since Sherry Miller and her family had built a big house in the Piedmont Hills and moved away.

Faith wanted me to stay and read with her when I got there. That's all Faith did was read. She didn't like playing outside. She didn't have a bicycle, and she didn't even have a television set. I told her that I would call her and that

I would come and see her when I could, but I never did. The closest that I came to her house again after we moved was when I was much older, and I married the man whose father owned the office building that I used to cut through the parking lot to get to Faith's house.

And now it was time to say goodbye and start our new life in a new neighborhood. Mom and I walked through the little duplex that appeared much larger without all of the furniture. Mickey went ahead with Uncle Rick and Uncle Jack to take the last load to the new house. Our feet and our voices echoed through the house as we checked every cabinet and drawer, also making sure that we left the duplex clean for the next tenants so we would get our $50.00 deposit back.

Once we got settled into the new house, Daddy called to invite us to come to Los Angeles to celebrate my tenth birthday. He said he wanted to take us to Disneyland and he would pay for our airplane tickets. Auntie Ona, Daddy's sister, and Uncle Don had moved to Pasadena because Uncle Don had a job teaching high school so we could visit them too while we were there and we could see our new little cousin, born the day before my eighth birthday. Lisa would turn two this year and we could celebrate our birthdays together. Lisa and I even looked alike.

Mickey and I were so excited to fly for the first time that we could hardly breathe. And Mom had only flown one other time so she was nervous too.

Cindy stayed with Aunt Pat because she was only four and a half. Mickey and I were sworn to secrecy.

Our flight was scheduled to leave in the early morning and we would be at the Los Angeles Airport in one hour from the time the plane took off. The only other time we had gone to Los Angeles was by train and it took all day to get there. The three of us walked through the front door of the San Jose Airport, a large yellow building with high ceilings. We were all dressed up in our Sunday school clothes, and I was so afraid that I was going to throw up that I didn't want to eat anything. Mom finally convinced me to sip on some orange juice before we left. When we heard our flight announced we walked through the back door, and then across the pavement to walk up the stairs, and then get on the airplane. My legs felt weak and floppy as I made my way up the steps. *If the plane crashed would it hurt or would we just die without knowing what happened?* I wondered. With the exception of both of my arms being torn off by Daddy and Nana this was the first time I had ever been faced with my own death and I was petrified.

Happily, we all arrived in one piece with Daddy waiting anxiously to sweep us off in his new burgundy Cadillac with a white convertible top. Our first stop was to our motel in Gardena. It had a swimming pool. And before I could even get the words out of my mouth, Daddy said, "A friend of mine loaned me his car this week so Mummy and I could take you kids to Disneyland." On the way, he asked us questions about how we were doing in our new house. Mickey and I

told him excitedly about all the kids in the neighborhood that we had to play with and that we could play in the street because there was an orchard at the end of the block and the only people who drove up our street were people who lived there.

"But how do you like the house?" He asked.

"We like it!" Mickey and I chimed in at the same time.

"We have our own bathroom and Cindy and I don't have to sleep in the same room with Mickey," I chirped.

"Mickey? Oh it's Mickey now." Daddy looked at Mom and shook his head.

"His name is Robert Michael," Mom said. My heart started pounding because I thought that I had started a fight. "I didn't want him starting school with the nickname Moke." Mom spit the name out as if Moke was a stupid name.

"How bout you Moke? How do you like the house?" Daddy asked.

"I have to mow the lawn now, Pops," Mickey said. *Pops? When did Mickey start calling Daddy Pops?* I wondered.

"You're really growing up now Moke. Now that you can help Mummy with the heavy work, maybe I'll have to increase your allowance." *What? Was he kidding? We've never seen any of our allowance money. For all I know, he used it to pay for this trip.*

Los Angeles looked so different from San Jose with its wide boulevards, and freeways with hundreds of lanes, and overpasses crisscrossing every which

way, and palm trees. There were palm trees so tall, you couldn't see the top of them, and they were everywhere. Billboards lined the streets advertising Disneyland, Hollywood, Knott's Berry Farm, nightclubs, and restaurants. Big shiny cars passed us and everyone seemed to drive a new one. Before we knew it we were at the motel in Gardena and the first thing we wanted to do was go swimming.

"What about lunch?" Daddy asked. "You haven't eaten yet. You can't go in the pool until you have something to eat. You'll get cramps. Go unpack your suitcases and we'll go get something to eat."

Mickey and I entered our room from a door in Mommy and Daddy's room.

"Do you live here, Daddy?" I asked.

"No, I live a few blocks from here. I share an apartment with a friend."

"Are we going to go to your apartment?" I asked.

"Maybe. We'll see," he said. "We have a lot to do while you kids are here. Disneyland. Knott's Berry Farm. Hollywood. And we need to go see Auntie Ona and Uncle Don so we might not have time. Besides, it's just a two-bedroom apartment. There's not much to it."

This was my second visit to Disneyland, and I made up my mind that very day that when I am old enough to look for a job, Disneyland is the only place I will apply for a job. I didn't care what I had to do. Disneyland was the most beautiful place I had ever seen in my life. Even the walk up to Aunt Jemima's was lined with purple and white cabbages. Everywhere we went someone was close by

with a broom sweeping up the tiniest speck of dirt making sure that the park was spotless. There were trolley cars and trains taking people for rides. Everyone was busy doing something to make sure we had a good time.

Mickey and I somehow managed to get through our pancake breakfast at Aunt Jemima's that morning and now we could finally go on the rides. I couldn't figure out why we always had to eat something before we could do something fun. The Matterhorn had opened two years ago, so we wanted to go on that first except that the line was forty-five minutes long as well as the Submarine ride, Dumbo, the Peter Pan ride, Mr. Toad's Wild Ride, and we got to drive real cars.

Daddy got mad at Mickey and me because we were fighting over the controls on Dumbo. Mickey wanted Dumbo to go as high as it would go and I wanted to coast along on the lowest level, so we duked it out right there in the belly of a plastic elephant, right in front of Mom and Daddy. At the end of the day, Daddy dropped us off at the motel and didn't come back until late the next morning to take us to Knott's Berry Farm. We could tell that Mom was mad at Daddy, but she didn't want to get into a fight with him because then we would have a bad time.

"Where have you been?" Mom asked him.

"Hey, I gotta work," he snapped at her. "How do you think I'm gonna pay for all this?" *Funny, I thought we were paying for this trip with our allowance money. I'm sure we won't see a penny of it,* I thought.

"You kids go get dressed. We're going to Knott's Berry Farm today," Daddy said.

Mom didn't say anything, and Mickey and I went and got dressed. I would have been happy to stay at the motel all day and go swimming, but even when we are supposed to be on vacation, after moving without his help, after leaving our new friends in the neighborhood when we could be playing baseball in the street, we have to go to Knott's Berry Farm. *What was the big deal about Knott's Berry Farm? They sold homemade jam and had a fried chicken restaurant? So! Big deal!* I thought. We had never been there before and as we drove through the parking lot, the first thing I noticed was the ranch style fences that made me feel like we were on the Mickey Mouse Club ranch. *Would the Mouseketeers be greeting us at the front gate?* I wondered. *Maybe we will have fun.* And even though the mood in the car was dismal, I could escape into a world where everyone talked nicely to each other, (like Daddy was always demanding of Mickey and me), and didn't fight over every little thing.

When we got to the farm, it was time for lunch so we went to the restaurant first and had fried chicken and biscuits and homemade jam. Having food in our stomachs changed our mood, and we were ready to enjoy ourselves. There were old-fashioned car rides and a train, but the place was nothing like Disneyland, plus we could tell that Mom was still mad at Daddy. Mickey and I did our best to make Daddy think we were really having fun, but what we really wanted to do was get back to the motel and go swimming before it got dark.

When we got in the car to leave Daddy said, “I have dinner reservations at a restaurant in Hollywood.” He didn’t ask us if we wanted to go. He just told us we were going.

“Where are we going?” Mom asked.

Daddy turned to look at Mom as he was pulling out of the parking space. He sucked air through his front teeth like he did when he was really mad. “Nita, would you even know if I told you? Do you know any restaurants in Hollywood?”

“No, I don’t, Danny,” Mom said. “I just want to know what type of food we will be eating. I’m not that hungry.”

“Oh, you’re not that hungry,” he mimicked Mom. “Well maybe the kids are hungry. Kids are you hungry?”

“I’m not,” I said. “Can we go back to the motel and go swimming instead?”

“How bout you, Moke? Are you hungry?” Daddy asked.

“No. I’m tired. I just wanna go home.” Mickey sounded scared like he knew something bad was going to happen.

Daddy spun the car around the corner as he left the Knott’s Berry Farm parking lot, making the car swish from side to side. We could hear the tires squealing under us. Mickey and I slid back and forth across the leather seats and Mom moved closer to Daddy in the shuffle.

“Danny, stop!” Mom screamed. “You’re scaring the kids and you’re scaring me.”

I clenched my hands and pulled them to my chest. I closed my eyes tight. I kept saying, *please don't cry, please don't cry, please don't cry* over and over again to myself. When I finally opened my eyes, Mickey was holding onto the door handle with both hands. He looked back and forth at the two mean monsters in the front seat that had complete control of what would happen next. Another car sped by us and pulled in front of Daddy and then slowed down making us slow down.

"What the hell," Daddy said. "Now what's this asshole doin'?"

Daddy pulled close to the car and tapped the bumper.

"Daddy please," I screamed. "You're scaring us," I cried. He couldn't even hear me now. It was as if he was by himself in the car. He pulled something out from under the front seat and placed it on the seat between he and Mom. The car in front of us stopped and we stopped right behind it.

Daddy looked at Mom. "Stay in the car. There's a gun in the glove compartment," he said. "Use it if you need to." I could see about a twelve-inch red handle in his hand with a big black hammer on the end. Daddy got out of the car holding the mallet at his side. We could hear him arguing with the man. They were both saying "son of a bitch" to each other, "fucking asshole," "motherfucker." It was hard to hear who was saying what. Mickey and I were both crying and Mom was just sitting watching them intently. We heard Daddy yell, "I've got my wife and kids in the car, you asshole."

Our car suddenly flooded with light from behind us. We could hear a man's voice say, "Put your hands up in the air where I can see them." It sounded like it was coming from a loud speaker. Daddy dropped the mallet and put his hands in the air. The man had his hands over his head now too. One policeman looked in at us from Mom's side of the car and told Mom to roll down the window, while the other one was talking to Daddy and the man. "Are you alright, Mam?" He asked.

"No I'm not," Mom's voice shook. "The man in front of us pulled his car in front of ours and made us stop." The policeman walked up to Daddy and the man, and the two policemen talked to them for a long time until the man finally got in his car and left.

Daddy drove us back to the motel and just left us there without saying a word. He didn't come back the next morning and we all wished that we had taken him up on his offer to go to dinner the night before because we were hungry now. Mom said that she had just enough money to buy us breakfast at the little restaurant around the corner if she didn't leave a tip. Mickey and I went swimming after breakfast, but still no Daddy when we were ready to eat lunch. Mom waited until the afternoon to see if Daddy would show up, and then she called Auntie Ona in Pasadena to see if Uncle Don could come and pick us up after he finished teaching his classes. Uncle Don taught high school in the summer too. Mom told Auntie Ona that we didn't have any money to eat, and

that Daddy had just left us at the motel without saying anything about when he would be back.

When Mom got off the phone, she said, “You guys pack up all of your stuff. We are going to stay at Auntie Ona’s house. I have no idea how we’re going to get home. We’ll probably have to call Nana and ask her to send us some money.”

So we packed up all of our stuff and waited for Uncle Don. He was so glad to see us. He gave us big bear hugs and told us that Auntie Ona was waiting for us at the house and had a big dinner all ready. We stayed with them the next two nights while we waited for Daddy. Mom tried to call him at his apartment but there was no answer. I really didn’t care if I ever saw him again.

We had fun at Auntie Ona’s playing with our little cousin and watching our television shows. Today was Lisa’s birthday and tomorrow would be my birthday so Auntie Ona had a cake for us, and everyone sang the happy birthday song. Auntie Ona was just like Grandma Wagle. She always made us feel safe and like she wanted us to be with her, and her house smelled like coffee and cake just like Grandma’s house.

The next afternoon Uncle Don took us around Pasadena and showed us the Rose Parade route and The Rose Bowl where they played football. He even took us inside so we could see how big the stadium is. When we got back to the house, Mom started to cry, and she said that she would never let him talk her into coming to Los Angeles ever again. And she didn’t.

Daddy showed up the afternoon before we were supposed to go back to San Jose and took Mom out to the front yard to talk, probably so they could have a fight. When Mom came back in the house, her eyes were red and she said that Daddy was going to drive us home the next night. We all peeked out the window to watch them. Daddy didn't have the burgundy Cadillac when he came back. He was driving an old red car that looked like the red Plymouth that he had run into the pole with a couple of years ago.

When he came to get us the next night, it was dark and we didn't know for sure if he would show up at all. He drove us home with a vengeance in the old red car. It was a sunny Saturday morning when we pulled into the driveway. We all went straight to the kitchen to see what there was to eat and found the freezer door slightly open. Mom had dampened all of the ironing before we left and put the clothes in a plastic bag, but when she realized that she didn't have enough time to do the ironing and she didn't want the clothes to mildew she stuffed the bag of clothes into the freezer, not realizing that the clothes would expand when the water froze. Daddy just stood staring into the freezer sucking his front teeth. "I'm goin' to bed," he said.

Chapter IV

We Are Divorced?

"Mom, you and Daddy are divorced?" I asked.

"Where did you hear that Annie?" Mom asked.

A question with a question. Will I ever get a straight answer from anybody in this family? I wondered. "On the way to school. Carol Gerbrandt's mother saw something called the end degree in the newspaper," I said.

"You mean the final decree," Mom said.

"Okay the final decree. Does that mean that you and Daddy are divorced?" I asked impatiently. "Mom, please. Just answer the question."

"Don't get smart with me, young lady."

"Okay, I'm sorry," I said. Mom didn't say anything for a long time. I could tell that she was thinking about how to answer me.

"Yes. It means we are divorced. I don't have the paperwork in my hands yet, but since Carol Gerbrandt's mother saw it in the newspaper, it must be final," Mom said sarcastically as she spit Carol Gerbrandt's mother out of her mouth. "We are divorced."

Carol Gerbrandt and Viki Wasson and I started walking to school together at the beginning of the school year. Carol was in the sixth grade and Viki and I were in the fifth. Carol lived on College Drive and Viki lived across the street from us with her mother, stepfather, and little brother, Tristrum. We were good

friends, but Viki and Carol had been friends for a long time and they were much smarter than me, so I always felt like an outsider when I was with them.

I had been to Carol's house a few times but her parents made me feel like I didn't belong there—like Carol shouldn't be hanging around with someone whose parents don't live together. They were good Christians and maybe they didn't want whatever was going on in my family to rub off on their only daughter. They didn't seem to care that I also went to Sunday school every Sunday. Mr. and Mrs. Gerbrandt made polite conversation with me and then went back to reading their newspapers. Sometimes I would catch them staring at me as if I was one of those people in the Bible who had leprosy and they wanted to make sure that I didn't touch anything.

Viki's family was more like mine. Her mother worked full time, like mine, and Viki had to watch out for her little brother like I did with Cindy and Mickey. Her mom and stepfather were always nice to me—well, nice to me until one day when they caught Viki and me making prank phone calls from their phone, and I got blamed as if it wasn't Viki's idea, only mine. Viki's stepfather came up behind me and grabbed the phone out of my hand. My heart was pounding. We had been dialing random numbers asking whoever picked up the phone if their refrigerator was running and then when they said yes, we told them that they better catch it and hung up. And then we laughed until our sides hurt. This was much more fun than doing our homework or watching television. Viki's parents didn't tell my mother what we did, but they told Viki that I couldn't come over

anymore unless one of them was home. I overheard Viki's stepfather tell Viki's mother that I was "the product of a broken home" and that Viki shouldn't be allowed to hang out with me anymore. You would think that I had robbed a bank the way they were acting. And now I really was the product of a broken home. It was official—on paper—the judge said so, and Carol Gerbrandt's mother had spilled the beans. Daddy wouldn't be in our kitchen on Saturdays making his scrambled egg concoction singing Tutti Fruitti ever again.

"What does that mean for us, Mom? Will we have to choose where we are going to live? What happens to *us* now? What happens to Mickey, and Cindy, and me?"

Mom had threatened to send us away to a boarding school on more than one occasion if we didn't "straighten up" as she put it. Daddy used to tell us to, "straighten up and fly right"—words from a Nat King Cole song that we must have heard a thousand times by now. We listened to Daddy when he told us to do something. We were afraid of him, of his voice, of his icy glares when he caught us saying mean things to each other. When he opened his mouth, we stood up straight and did whatever he told us to do. I don't know why we were so afraid of him. He didn't believe in spanking us, and we knew that he never would. He said it was because his mother had spanked him so much. He said that spanking hadn't done anything to make him behave. All of the spankings he had gotten just made him worse. Mom would swipe at us, but we got good at ducking out of her way. She would say, "This is my roof and as long as you are living

under my roof, you will live by my rules." But we knew that Mom didn't have the money to send us away to boarding school. *Will she be able to finally send us off now to live with Daddy so he can straighten us out?* I wondered. *Maybe somebody should straighten them out.*

"Nothing will change Annie. You kids will live with me of course. Do you really think your dad is capable of taking care of you kids? By himself?" She asked. "You remember what a disaster it was when he tried to take Cindy to Los Angeles over Easter week by himself? First he cut her hair because it was too much of a hassle for him to take care of. And then Auntie Ona had to make arrangements to get her home safely on the plane by herself." Mom stood for a minute thinking with her hand over her mouth and then she said softly, tearfully, shaking her head, "She left with that beautiful long hair down to her butt, and she came back looking like Buster Brown, her hair in a Page Boy that he had cut himself. That *he* had cut," Mom said again. "I will never forgive him for that."

I stood and thought for a minute. Our lives had changed so much since we moved here. We lived in a *real* neighborhood with kids our own age whose parents are married and that live together in the same house. It wasn't like living downtown. We don't have to go to the school playground or cross Guadalupe Creek or run across busy streets to find someone to play with. I would be eleven in August, and I was almost finished with the fifth grade. I had been turning in all of my homework—on time. My teacher actually remembered my name in this school.

And then Mom said, “Getting a divorce also makes it easier for me to go after Daddy in court and get him to pay child support.”

Except for Cindy seeing Daddy during Easter week, Mom and Mickey and I hadn’t seen Daddy since Christmas Day. He showed up on Christmas Eve with his arms loaded down with presents for everybody. He brought mine in separately because it was the heaviest.

His clothes hung on him like he had either lost weight or borrowed clothes from one of his gambler friends. Gambler’s clothes all looked alike. They wore gold slacks, leather slip-on shoes with little leather tassels that dangled over the top of their toes, a white shirt and a flashy tie, with a brown sport jacket. They all slicked their hair back like Elvis Presley and Ricky Nelson. Daddy had on a sparkly ring this time that flashed around the room when he moved his hand. It made him look like a real wheeler-dealer. I knew he didn’t dress like that when he was cheating people out of their money. He wouldn’t want his victims to get suspicious—to think that he actually *made* money at gambling. He wanted them to think that he was just as poor as they were. I was starting to put this all together now that I was older.

Tonight he wore a gold and brown sweater over his white shirt instead of a sport jacket. His face was thinner than it was when we saw him during the summer and he had a fresh scar across his right jaw line. It still looked red, like it hadn’t healed yet. I knew he didn’t have that scar last summer.

He showed up just in time to take us to our church performance with Grandma and Grandpa Wagle. Mommy never told us that he was coming because she said she didn't want us to be disappointed if he didn't show up. We spent some time with Grandma and Grandpa and their Lutefisk dinner, and then we took off to Nana's house so he could practice cheating at poker again with his marked cards and dealing from the bottom. *Would they ever learn?* I wondered.

And right on cue, after we opened our presents, he gave my aunts and uncles and my great grandfather their money back, and they all swore at him in Italian, making it impossible for us to have a good time after a fight like that, so we went home. But instead of going back to Nana's for Christmas dinner the next day, the five of us went to Grandma and Grandpa's Wagle's house.

Grandma made what she always called a "nice" roast, buttery mashed potatoes that she whipped with a potato masher until they were light and fluffy, brown gravy and peas. Grandma didn't want to hear anything negative or bad about anybody, especially not on Christmas. She would be horrified if she knew how Daddy had been spending our Christmas Eves for the last several years.

When it was time to eat, Grandma said, "Sit up at the table now," as she rushed around back and forth from the kitchen to the dining room directing Auntie Ona and Mom to put the food on the table. When everyone was seated she looked around the table and said, "Okay now, let's say grace." And then she bowed her head and started the prayer as we all followed along somberly. "God is great. God is good. We will thank him for our food. By his hands, we all are

fed. Give us Lord our daily bread. Amen." We never shared personal prayers. Personal prayers were private between the person praying and God—not for everyone else to hear. It was the first year that we did not have turkey for Christmas dinner and it felt a little strange to break with tradition, but maybe it had been a sign of things to come. We didn't know it then, but it would be the last time that Daddy went with us to Nana's for Christmas Eve ever again.

And now my parents are divorced.

Grandma and Nana will cry when they find out. How could Daddy let this happen? I wondered. I was actually starting to like him, especially when he brought us presents. And he seemed nicer to us now that we were getting older. I loved being able to type my school reports on my new Smith Corona typewriter that he gave me for Christmas.

"Does everyone know?" I asked Mom.

"Aunt Pat and Auntie Ona know. Raylene knows too. They encouraged me to file the papers," Mom said. "But Nana and Grandma don't know yet. I will tell Nana, and your dad can tell Grandma. Please don't take this upon yourself Annie. Please."

Aunt Pat, Auntie Ona, and Raylene were teenagers when I was born. They were unmarried and always around me when my mother couldn't cope or just needed a little extra help. They took me places and made sure that I had what I needed, and now when I needed them the most, they were raising their own kids.

Aunt Pat and Auntie Ona became friends when they were in junior high school. Raylene was a year older than Mom, and they both went to San Jose High School on the San Jose State campus. They were all connected in some way, and in and out of each other's houses and lives. For me, I had so many aunts and uncles and close family friends that I called aunt and uncle, I didn't actually know that some of them were not blood relatives. Of all of them, my Aunt Pat and my Auntie Ona were the oldest friends, but kind of an odd couple really. If you knew them, you would wonder how they got to be such good friends. But even though they were very different from each other, in their own ways, they were my two favorite aunts and were best friends before my parents even knew each other.

Auntie Ona went to church every Sunday and obeyed her parents, but according to my mother, Aunt Pat used to stand out on the street in front of their house and say things like, "coca, peepee, poopoo" as loud as she could. Mom thought for sure that God was going to strike Aunt Pat dead and she would go to Hell right then and there. When Aunt Pat got into high school, she and all of her friends smoked cigarettes and drank beer. Auntie Ona didn't smoke, drink, or say bad words—ever. Auntie Ona married a nice man from Nebraska who went to the First Covenant Church. Aunt Pat married a raging drunk from Oklahoma, and in all fairness, she didn't know he was a drunk when she married him. Aunt Pat stuck thumbtacks in all of the piano hammers so she could play honkytonk music. Auntie Ona played Christian songs on her piano at Grandma Wagle's.

The good thing for us was that their differences didn't keep them from paying attention to Mickey and me. We needed all the attention we could get, having parents who were so preoccupied with their own problems.

Before Aunt Pat got married, she used to take me to the Holland Creamery on Santa Clara Street. We would pull into our parking space on the side of the creamery in her brand new Chevy convertible, or at least it was brand new to me, and then wait for the carhop to come out to the car. Aunt Pat let me stand on the front seat—my left shoulder tucked behind her right shoulder and my arm wrapped tightly around her neck. If she had to stop fast her arm would tighten over me like the metal bar on the Ferris wheel to keep me from going through the windshield she used to say. Aunt Pat would give the carhop our order—"a hamburger and a strawberry milkshake please." She always said please and thank you to everybody so that I would start saying please and thank you. And then when the waitress brought the order out to the car, Aunt Pat rolled the window up two or three inches so the carhop could attach the tray to our car window. Our milkshake came in a tall silver container covered with frost. She filled up a glass for us and let me sip the thick creamy liquid—so sweet with little bits of frozen strawberries all through it. And then she would offer me bites of her hamburger until I couldn't fit another thing into my stomach. The hamburger was so big that most of the time we didn't finish it and left it on our tray.

One night when I asked Mom about how she and Daddy met and what they used to do when they went out, she told me that the Holland Creamery

would close at midnight and the owner, Jack Allen, would serve Italian food to the locals. Mom said that she would sneak out of the house, which she told me that I was never ever supposed to do, to be with Daddy and they would stop in at the Holland Creamery. She said that Jack knew Daddy well enough to invite him to play cards in the back room. "Daddy played a few hands of poker with the boys," she said. "And I hung out with my girlfriends."

The day I found out that my parents had gotten divorced, I needed more than a hamburger and a strawberry milkshake at the Holland Creamery. I needed for Aunt Pat to take me to Peter's Bakery on Alum Rock Avenue for donuts and then go back to Nana's like we used to and have Nana make us real hot chocolate with marshmallows, and drink out of Nana's thick brown coffee mugs. Donuts and hot chocolate, Nana and Aunt Pat were the only things that would make me feel better after this news.

I felt like I needed to see Daddy. I wanted him to come home and be with us and make my mother happy. I wanted to see Mom at the kitchen sink doing the dishes and to see Daddy come up behind her and wrap his arms around her like he used to. I wanted to feel like I came from two people who loved each other instead of from two people who bickered on the phone about money and how my dad never spent time with his kids. I knew that Mom had talked to the district attorney about what a bad father Daddy was and how he never gave us even enough money for groceries, but that he had plenty of money to spend on his own clothes and jewelry and fancy apartments in Los Angeles and to take his

girlfriends out for fancy dinners. She even told the DA how she had visited his apartment and that he was living "high off the hog," she said, but he couldn't send us regular amounts of money so that she could pay our rent and buy us food.

But since the Peter's Bakery and Holland Creamery days, things were different with Aunt Pat, and I couldn't turn to her now either. By the time Mom divorced Daddy, Aunt Pat had four children and another one on the way. Aunt Pat didn't have time for me anymore. She only called to ask me to come over and help her take care of her kids, to babysit so she and Uncle Rick could go out. I had been the flower girl in their wedding when I was five. From the moment I met Uncle Rick, he instantly became a second dad to me. He spoke with a southern drawl and called me "darlin" and treated me like I was his very own daughter. His family was from Oklahoma, and they would always joke about being called "Okies." Uncle Rick's sister, Fay, taught me how to make, what she called "Okie noodles," in Nana's kitchen. Okie noodles looked just like egg noodles—long and wide—a comfort food with cream tuna on top. And when I was so car sick on the way to North Dakota Grandma was horrified when I asked the waitress for Okie noodles in one of the little restaurants where we had stopped to eat.

Uncle Rick's family and the Lofano family became very close, so when Uncle Rick showed up drunk one night when I was staying with Aunt Pat and beat her up right in front of me, I just kept crying until I had no more tears left in

me. I had seen Daddy push Mom up against a wall and put his hands around her neck, but I had never seen Uncle Rick be mean like that—ever. Aunt Pat had to call the police that night, but Uncle Rick left before they got there. Mom came and got me because after I finally stopped crying, then I couldn't stop trembling. Mom said that the stress of owning a home and then having to support four children, all one year apart was just too much for Uncle Rick, and she didn't think that Aunt Pat should've had all those kids one on top of the other like that.

Uncle Rick and Aunt Pat had bought a home in Tropicana Village after they got married. We called it a home not a house. For us, the definition of a house was something that you rented, and a home was something that you bought and lived in forever until you died.

Tropicana Village was a brand new housing tract with roofs that were only slightly slanted and they had large windows—very modern. I had never seen anything like them. Palm trees lined the entry and were dotted around the track. It reminded me of the Palm trees in Los Angeles.

Aunt Pat and Uncle Rick bought the first colored television in our family so we all wanted to go to their house to watch our shows. It was during one of their many summer backyard barbeques that I first learned how to use a Hula Hoop, which was a large plastic hoop about thirty inches round. We balanced it on our hips as we made it go around and around and around until we were exhausted

and couldn't stand up to move our hips anymore. One time, I hula hooped so much that I got the flu and spent a week in bed.

We loved to go to Aunt Pat and Uncle Rick's house. They always made sure that we had lots of fun things to do. But after they were married for a few years, Aunt Pat had to go to where Uncle Rick worked on Friday afternoons (he hung sheet rock in all of the new housing tracks that were being built in San Jose) and try to collect his paycheck before he got there to pick it up himself. If she couldn't get there on time, he would pick it up and spend every penny of it on liquor. By Friday afternoon when Uncle Rick was planning his weekend drinking spree, he would get plenty mad if that check wasn't there. The arguments started and Uncle Rick turned into a scary monster.

When we moved to the "west side," Mom found another babysitter for Cindy so that Cindy didn't have to see Aunt Pat and Uncle Rick fight like I did. The new babysitter lived around the block from us, and she went to Del Mar High School. Cindy checked in with her after she got home from school and then she would spend the rest of the afternoon with Mickey and me, and whoever else wasn't supposed to be in our house when Mom wasn't home. We watched monster movies on cold rainy days or played baseball in the street if it was hot and sunny. We told Cindy that we would torture her until she was dead if she ever told Mom that all of our friends came in the house after school.

Since Uncle Rick and Daddy wouldn't be taking Mom and Aunt Pat out on the weekends, Mom and Aunt Pat sometimes would go out together, so I really

had my hands full with six kids to take care of, and I was only ten. Because of all of the babysitting I had been asked to do after Aunt Pat had her kids, I grew to hate children and babysitting altogether. For me, there wasn't enough money in the world that could make me like this job. I made it known that very year that I was never ever going to get married, and I certainly would never ever have any screaming "brat kids."

Soon after Tropicana Village opened, they got sued because they refused to sell a home to a "Negro" family. Everyone was talking about how if a "Negro" family moved into their neighborhood, the whole neighborhood would "go to the dogs." Our neighborhood hadn't gone to the dogs and we had a "Negro" family living a few blocks from us and the kids went to my school, and the school wasn't going "to the dogs" either, whatever that meant. It wasn't long after we heard about the Tropicana Village lawsuit that Mom came home from work and told me that a "Negro" woman had been interviewed for a job at the car agency where she worked, and the woman didn't get hired just because her skin was black. Mom felt badly for her but she said that there wasn't anything she could do about it. "I can't afford to lose my job right now. Without your dad giving us money, I have to think about feeding you kids. Certainly not about other people's problems," she said.

Mom would come home everyday from work dead tired and complain that while she did the same job as a man, she could not get paid as much money as

a man. “These men don’t have families to support. They are single and they make twice as much money as I do. I am just fed up,” she would say over and over again.

Mom wasn’t the type of person to just sit around and “let grass grow under my feet,” she used to say, so she joined the American Business Women’s Association. She started learning new ways to make herself more valuable to her employer. And then everyday when she went to work, she made sure that she learned something new about what went on in the car business. “After all,” she said. “I grew up in the car business. My dad owned two car lots. I should be able to get a better job that pays more money.” When she felt like she had learned enough to move into another position she started looking through the newspaper and applied for a job at Friendly Rambler on Stevens Creek Boulevard. She stayed there for a little while, got more experience, and then accepted a job at a dealership in Los Gatos where she started learning how to transfer car titles. She became a “DMV girl,” is what they called her—starting salary at $400.00 a month. We thought that we were rich and this was only the beginning of Mom’s new career. We cheered her on. The more money she made, the more Christmas presents we got and the more clothes we could buy.

As a DMV girl, she got a job working for Gus Mozart Volkswagen in Palo Alto. The general manager told her that he would hire her on a trial basis. He told her that the agency normally didn’t hire attractive women because attractive women distracted the car salesmen. He told her that if she distracted the car

salesmen that he would have to let her go. And he did let her go right after she met and distracted Cliff Lucas, the man who would one day become her husband and our stepfather. Mom was dating Earle Parsons at the time so meeting Cliff didn't seem that big of a deal. Earle had played football for The San Francisco Forty-Niners. He sold cars at one of the dealerships Mom had worked for. Earle didn't drink alcohol. Whenever he came over, he always had a six-pack of Fresca with him. Earle moved into a studio apartment around the corner from us, and we thought for sure that he would be the one who would marry our mother. Mom never brought strange men home. Earle was the only boyfriend Mom had who was allowed to come in our house and wait for her to come home. She didn't trust "men around my girls," she said, but Earle was harmless and always nice to us and he really seemed to love our mother.

It didn't take her long to lose her job at Gus Mozart for being too pretty and a big distraction to all of those poor innocent car salesmen. She needed to find work, so her boss, who was a woman, felt so badly about having to fire her that she made sure that Mom had severance pay and they also sold her a new Volkswagen for which Cliff Lucas set up the deal and made sure she got a fair price and a bank loan to go along with it. This was our first new car and Mickey and Cindy and I were really excited. We would no longer ask Mom to drop us off a block away from where we were going. We wouldn't be embarrassed by her old beat up Rambler station wagon with the bald tires ever again. Of course she would need a job to pay for this new Volkswagen.

We didn't know it at the time but this would be Mom's last job working for a car agency. A man named Fred Sahadi hired her as a bookkeeper for The Cardiff Affair Apartments and The Cambrian Affair Apartments, which he owned in Campbell. At the back of the Cardiff, there was a swim and racket club that was only for the people who lived there and their friends. They catered to people who were single or newly divorced. There was a bar and they served a buffet dinner every night except for Sundays. On Sundays, they opened for brunch from ten to two. Mom stayed with Mr. Sahadi for thirty-five years before she retired as his trusted accountant. All the while she got raise after raise. We were not only able to pay the rent on time; we were able to pay the rent period, and we even moved into a nicer house, all without the help of "Daddy."

In 1963 Martin Luther King led the March on Washington and on November 22, of that same year, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. I turned twelve that year and it seemed like the world had come to an end. I was just getting used to my parents being divorced and now this. I started paying attention to things in the news and what it all meant for our family and me. It wasn't enough that we all lived under the threat of Nikita Khrushchev and the fear of an atomic bomb wiping us all out. We heard air raid sirens regularly, and our teachers scared us to death by showing us pictures of the mushroom cloud and what we were supposed to do if we saw one. But now someone had killed our president. I kept telling myself there was nothing to worry about because

nothing ever happened like this in California. God Himself protected California and if I kept going to church every Sunday and doing my fair share of praying, we would all be safe in California. President Kennedy would have never been assassinated if he had come to California that day instead of going to Dallas. I couldn't figure out why anyone would want to live anywhere else but here.

According to Daddy—the person with a gun in his glove compartment and a mallet under his seat—all of the violence in the world was the fault of television shows like *Dragnet*.

The day that President Kennedy was assassinated, I was in the seventh grade at Blackford Junior High School. Public schools and offices closed immediately. Mickey was in the fifth grade at Sherman Oaks Elementary. When we got home, we got on our bikes and rode to the car dealership where Mom worked on Stevens Creek Boulevard. It was a long way from our house. We didn't know what to do with ourselves. We were afraid. Mom sent us home and said she would leave work early and meet us at home.

I sat in front of our television set for four straight days and watched only the reports of how it happened over and over again. We were not interested in monster movies or playing baseball in the street. The whole neighborhood stayed in their houses by their television sets waiting for something else to happen. Mom stayed home from work for a few days. The only good thing that came out of this was that Mom was there to do all of the cooking. I even saw Jack Ruby kill Lee Harvey Oswald on live television—one man actually killing

another man on something other than *Dragnet*. I watched the tape many times of Kennedy slumping down in the convertible he and Jackie Kennedy were riding in as they made their way through the crowded streets of Dallas. I watched the angle from the building the bullet must have come from in order for Oswald to have a perfect shot at President Kennedy. *Why did they have to go to Dallas? Why couldn't they have come to San Jose?* I wondered. I watched as Lyndon Johnson was sworn in as our new president. I watched the funeral and the Kennedy's two small children, Little John and Caroline, Jackie Kennedy dressed all in black with a black veil covering her face. I thought about my own father and how I would feel if he died, especially if somebody had murdered him. I learned much later that Daddy had been in Mexico that day helping an underage girl get an abortion—apparently the girlfriend of one of his "associates," as he called them, who paid him well, or so he said. They had closed the borders that day, and he was stuck in Mexico with an underage girl until the borders reopened.

I felt sad and happy at the same time about their divorce. Daddy always told us that he cared about us when we saw him. He always told us that he loved us. He just didn't always show us that he cared about us and loved us. He asked Mickey how he was doing in baseball, but he never attended even one of his games. And Mom didn't go to Mickey's games either because she was embarrassed to be a divorcee. Daddy brought us gifts but failed to keep a roof over our heads, food in our mouths, or pay the PG&E bill. For Daddy, it was

always the showy stuff—things people could see him do. Mom worked hard and paid for the things that were expected of a parent. No one, including us, made a big deal of those things—the necessities. Daddy was much more interested in being cool and showing off to his friends and *his* side of the family.

Before the divorce, Mom didn't talk badly about Daddy. She didn't want to put us in the middle or make us feel like it was our fault, but she was starting to speak out more now that she made her own money. "He cares more about his friends and gambling than he does about his wife and his kids," she would say. I heard Mom say this so many times that I was beginning to recite her words myself. Daddy came home once in a while and gave us a little money but it wasn't much, so it was all up to Mom. She kept after the district attorney to get more money out of him but it only trickled in, and it became a waste of her time and energy. Plus it made her angry every time she had to go to court and face him. Each time Mom found herself listening to him in front of a judge tell the judge about how he didn't have any money. And then seeing his long sad face and wearing his old paint clothes wore on her nerves.

We had started Sherman Oaks Elementary School having already made friends with most of the kids on the block, so it didn't feel strange on our first day not knowing anyone. Edythe Peterson, my Sunday school teacher, lived a few blocks away from us, so Mom asked her if she would give Mickey and me a ride to Sunday school with her. Mom picked us up after Sunday school, but we had

to wait for her on the corner, making us wait until the church service had almost ended. We were not only Norwegian and Italian in a Swedish church, we were also the spawn of Danny Wagle, the gambler who had abandoned his kids for his gambling habit, standing on the street corner waiting to be picked up like two little waifs. Prejudices were not only for dark skinned people and women; they were also for little kids who weren't born into two-parent households.

Fortunately, our neighborhood was so different from the people in our church. We lived next door to the Rodriguez family and directly across the street from them lived the Moltzons. Across the street from us lived the Wassons and next door to them lived a cop and his family. They had a German Shepherd who was a police dog. The Lozano family lived down the street and then a little farther down the block lived the Matrangas and the Weeks family. The neighborhood was a mixture of ethnic backgrounds, so with us being half-breeds ourselves we fit right in, unlike we did at our Swedish church. You could say that we had our own *West Side Story* going on on our block. After all of the kids went to see the movie the year it came out, we pretended like we were either the Sharks or the Jets. It wasn't long after *West Side Story* that these two groups became the "surfers" and "the hard guys."

The surfers wore white tee shirts with logos like Hang Ten, Surf's Up, and Ride the Wave. The hard guys wore starchy white pressed tee shirts with black jeans and collared shirts. Whether hard guys or surfers, we still had a dress code. If we were not in school, we wore our shirts out, and if we were in school,

shirts were always tucked in. There were fights sometimes, but for the most part, everyone got along.

Mr. Grimes was my teacher in the fifth grade and then again in the sixth grade, and he was just the right amount of positive male attention I needed. These were my coming out years—the years that boys started paying attention to me, especially Raymond Rodriguez who lived next door. He was two years older than I was, and he would tease me and treat me like I was a little kid, but Mom always said that "when they tease you, it's because they like you," and he was teasing me—everyday.

I didn't think I was pretty and deserved the attention I was suddenly getting. I always thought that I looked like a monkey. I didn't have a bridge over my already flat nose and I had full lips—just the opposite of Twiggy, a tall skinny model with paper-thin lips. I would pull my lips in tight to make them thinner and I often wondered why I hadn't inherited lips like Grandpa Wagle whose lips looked like two straight pencil lines. But after we visited Uncle John in prison, my confidence was restored by all of the attention I got from the other prisoners. Uncle John wrote to me and said that all of his prison buddies said that I look like Audrey Hepburn. I took that as a compliment.

When Mr. Grimes arranged our places, he sat me in front of John Rossell who was constantly pulling one strand of my hair at a time and disrupting the class when I tried quietly to swipe at him. Mr. Grimes seemed to think it was

funny. John and I somehow stayed friends from the fifth grade and all through high school.

Chapter V

High Hopes

I yanked the note off of the front door and read it in disbelief. "I am sleeping. Wake me when Mummy gets home. Daddy." *Why does he always call Mom Mummy? Doesn't he know how to spell Mommy? What is wrong with him?* The blood that was now draining from my face, my shoulders, my arms, and my legs felt like it had somehow left my body and I was dripping and standing in a sea of red. My chest felt so heavy that I could hardly breath. *Sleeping? Where?* I wondered. *In Mom's bed? Oh my God. Has he lost his mind? What if Earle comes over? When will he leave us alone?*

I had no appreciation, and certainly no respect, for the kind of intelligence it took for my dad to mastermind a deck of cards and do, what he called "magic." To me, he was just a common hood—a card marker, card counter, and a bottom-dealer. He was just one of those guys who picks fights at school and then goads those he has picked fights with out to the parking lot after school. A tough guy. A big shot. Incapable of being anything other than a manipulative cheat and a liar.

I had high hopes for myself—for my own success, and I surely had no intention of following in his unethical footsteps. But what I really needed was for him to go away so I didn't have to explain him—what he did for a living, and how he behaved—to any of my friends.

His occupation of choice embarrassed me. I had even tried many times to pretend that he didn't exist. My life was so much easier when he wasn't in it. If only he would stop showing up, especially at the most inopportune times. *It really needs to stop!* I thought.

I slammed the note down on the dining room table and peeked down the dark hallway to see if Mom's bedroom door was closed. *If I make him feel less than welcome when he wakes up, maybe he will just go away and go live his life feeling unwanted and unloved and not want to come back,* I thought.

I went straight to the kitchen and pulled the door closed taking no chances that he might hear me and wake up. I pulled the telephone receiver off of the wall phone and dialed my mother's number at work. My hand shook so much I could barely dial. *Why am I so nervous? I haven't done anything wrong. He's the one who should be nervous, and he is in there quietly, innocently sleeping. Who does he think he is, GoldieLocks?*

"May I speak to Anita Wagle please," I whispered.

"Annie?" The receptionist asked.

"Yes it's me. Is my mom there?"

"Are you alright? You sound strange," she said.

"My brother fell asleep. I think he has the flu. I don't want to wake him," I lied. *What a dumb thing to say,* I thought. *She will ask Mom about Mickey and then she will know that I lied.*

"Okay, I'll put you through," she said.

Mom picked up right away. “Hi honey.”

“Mom, Daddy,” is all I said before she interrupted me.

“I know. Your dad is there. I had no way of letting you know so I told him to write a note to you kids so you wouldn’t be scared when you found him,” she said.

“Is he here because of my grades? Did you tell him?” I felt agitated now at the thought that *he* might be talking to me about *my* grades.

“No I didn’t. He drove all night with a friend and needed a place to sleep. He wants to see you kids. I will be home soon. If he wakes up before I get there, please be nice to him so he doesn’t leave. I need to talk to him.” That was code for she wants to hassle him about money. And there goes my plan for being rude.

I had just finished my first quarter in high school; my report card came in the mail with three Ds and two F’s. Mom was horrified even after I promised her that I would bring my grades up. “You’re damn right you will bring them up!” she yelled. As she looked closer, she said, “You got an F in Home Economics? With all the cooking you do and the clothes you make, and *you* got an F in Home Economics? How does that happen?” I could tell that there was no stopping her now—she was on a roll. I had seen my mother angry many times, but now I could tell that she was going to make life downright impossible. I knew that I would be grounded forever.

"Mom. I promise. I will bring them up," I said.

"But how did this happen? I want to know first how you could possibly get an F in Home Economics."

"Mom, my teachers are stupid. They don't know how to cook and they don't know how to sew. Why should I let *them* teach *me* how to do things that I can do better than they can?" I shouted.

"Oh yea, you know everything, Annie. I forgot what a smarty pants you are," Mom said sarcastically.

"And anyway, I have been busy with high school stuff." I said.

"There is nothing more important than graduating from high school Annie. Nothing."

Mom hadn't graduated from high school, and I knew that she felt embarrassed about it. She didn't want anyone to know, but she did want us to know that it wasn't going to happen to us. Just before she would have graduated, she married my father—the big shot, on April 16, 1950. My mind goes blank when I think about the possibility of getting married and having children when there are so many choices out there—so many boys, so many places to see, things to do. Why would I want to tie myself down with a husband to take care of and then raise a bunch of his brat kids—alone? To get married before I turned thirty was unthinkable to me—if I even get married at all.

The closest I had come to a serious relationship with a boy was when I agreed to go steady with, Raymond Rodriguez, the boy that lived next door. I

was in the seventh grade and he was a freshman at Del Mar. I had had a huge crush on him since we had moved into the neighborhood. The night he gave me his ring, I couldn't sleep the whole night because I was afraid that I would lose it. I wrapped scotch tape around it to make it fatter so it would fit my finger. He even let me wear his signature corduroy green shirt. When everyone saw me wearing it, including Nana, they knew that I was Raymond's girl. Nana made it a point to drop by our house as often as possible to try to catch me in the house, alone with Raymond while Mom was at work, which she never did because we had become so good at escaping out the back door, one of many reasons Mom had to find another babysitter for Cindy.

We went steady for two years and then, during the summer after I graduated from the eighth grade, my feelings for Raymond just changed. This change started when I decided to spend a week at church camp in July, even though last year, after I got home from camp, I decided that it was for babies and I would never go again. It didn't take me long to find out that things can change in one hundredth of a second when you are a teenager.

I had been confirmed on May 16, 1965, exactly three months before my fourteenth birthday. Two weeks after Confirmation Sunday, I chose to be baptized in a dunking ceremony at Willow Glen Baptist Church on Minnesota Avenue. I wish that I could say that this all meant something to me but it didn't.

The baptism was performed at the Baptist church rather than at First Covenant because our church didn't have a dunking pool. When Pastor Carlson

forced my head under water and then pulled it back out, the only thunder I heard was my own coughing and choking—no choir of angels singing Glory be to God, no visions of how different my life would be after being totally immersed in holy water. I was just the same old Annie with the same old father, the same old mother, and the same old problems. Nothing changed. Nor did I have any miraculous way of solving these problems or even making them go away now that I was baptized. The one thing that I did know was that the only person I could depend on, and trust, was me, and my own ability to finish school, get a job, and get away from my parents who were the cause of all of my problems.

The one positive thing that was going on in my life was that our youth group spent time together and it made our relationships stronger. We had all studied together and everyone had passed their exams with high marks. While my grades in school were mediocre, my test scores in my confirmation classes had all been perfect from just memorizing every possible answer to every possible question. And I finally felt like the kids in church were accepting me as their equal, and that they weren't listening to their parents' gossip about me coming from a broken Italian/Norwegian home anymore. We had something in common. They were rebelling against their parents' values in the same way that I was rebelling against mine. *This must mean something,* I thought. *It must be a sign that I could be a Christian with Christian friends and that no matter what Daddy did to trash his own life, it had nothing to do with me.* This Swedish church could look down on me for being half Norwegian and half Italian, but they

would no longer look down on me because of the things my dad did and the way he lived.

When it was time to sign up for church camp, I let my girlfriends know that I wasn't going this year. I had decided to spend the summer hanging out with Raymond and getting ready for high school. But this wasn't good enough for them. They worked on me for an entire week making camp sound like a whole week away from our parents would be really fun, and we could meet kids from other churches. So I finally agreed to go and said goodbye to Raymond, not knowing how a decision like this was like being on the TV game show, *Let's Make a Deal*, and how when Monty Hall asks you which door you want and you choose door number three instead of door number two, you might get a donkey you have to find a home for. It changes your whole life forever. But as our car got closer to the perfume exuding from the redwood trees and permeating the insides of my nostrils, and the warm soft mountain air that swept over me and through my hair, I didn't realize how much I had come to truly love Mission Springs. Suddenly, I felt like I was on the most glorious high I could ever be on, and I knew what really brought me back to this mysterious place every year.

The tiny red cabins along Lockhart Gulch Road were all trimmed neatly with summer flowers. As I gazed out the rear window of the car, I felt like Brother Buzz soaring along the narrow road, laced with pine needles, to the theme song, *Flight of the Bumblebee.*

When we arrived at the main office, we were given our cabin assignments and a map of the entire mountain all the way up to the swimming pool. The chow bell that bellowed through the camp told us that lunch was being served. One car after another pulled into camp. The scene was intoxicating with the hope of making new friends, exchanging phone numbers, and having a fun week that involved Christian activities away from my neighborhood gang.

We hauled our sleeping bags and suitcases up to Laurel Lodge. This was the first year we didn't have a counselor in our room, and we were excited not to have the constant hovering that normally came with camp. Since we had all been confirmed and baptized, there was no need to recruit us into the Christian cult anymore. The smell of the cabin, with its knotty pine walls and the bare musty beds waited for us to spread out our sleeping bags and pillows, cozying up the room even more.

As always, our days were organized with breakfast, lunch, and dinner, Bible study, rallies, swimming, volleyball, and a little free time in the afternoon to relax and socialize. But this year, it was all high school kids—the sophomore, junior, and senior boys looking forward to meeting the new freshman girls, and we dolled ourselves up for the flirting and eye batting. "Not too much makeup, girls," our seventh-grade homeroom teacher used to say. "The natural look is in." So we did our best not to look like prostitutes trolling Second Street, but still look attractive enough to be chosen by some cute guy. By midweek I had developed

a serious crush on a junior named Jeff from San Mateo who finally asked me for my phone number the day before we left for home.

When I came back from camp, Raymond knew that something was wrong and I knew for sure that I didn't want to go steady with him anymore. I felt guilty, and I had no idea how in the world I was going to tell him that I wanted to break up with him. Just my announcement that I was going to Mission Springs this year, and how important it was to me, made him really angry. I couldn't imagine how he was going to react to my breaking up with him. I could feel myself making excuses now and lying to him about the whys and the whats and the whens.

Until I met Jeff at camp, I knew that hanging out with Christians meant that I would have to date someone geeky. I thought that all Christians wore khaki shorts with black tennis shoes and white socks. And I knew that their parents watched over them so carefully, that if I dated one of them, the parents would take us everywhere and watch our every move. I wasn't used to that. Jeff had called me a couple of times since I had come back to San Jose, but the conversations we had were not like the ones we had at camp. It was different when there wasn't a bunch of other kids around, and we were trying to talk without being interrupted. And Jeff didn't drive yet, so the chances of seeing him were as good as my dad's betting on a lame horse and winning.

I also wasn't completely sure that I wanted to commit myself totally to the church crowd. But I did know one thing for sure; I wasn't interested in Raymond

anymore. The boys who had moved in across the street where the Wassons had lived were now calling me fickle. My life felt like it was spinning out of control. I didn't want to leave the house except to go to school and church.

I started my freshman year at Del Mar in Raymond's shadow. He seemed to lurk around every corner, and I knew he wanted me to beg him to come back to him so he could protect me from whatever he thought I needed protection from. The only protection I needed right now was protection from him. Del Mar was enormous compared to Blackford Junior High, but somehow Raymond was everywhere and the thought of him sneaking up on me at any moment gave me the creeps.

Del Mar had eight hallways, each hallway with rows and rows of lockers between the classrooms. There was an outdoor quad where everyone ate on nice days and a big cafeteria and kitchen with about ten outdoor snack windows. On the other side of the outdoor quad was the indoor gym where the school held basketball games and other indoor sports. There was a baseball field, and a sunken bowl for football games on the other side of the student parking lot. The outdoor quad was also used for the annual graduation ceremony. We had five minutes between each class, and I could barely get to my locker to get my books for my next class, stuff my other books back into my already crammed locker, talk to my friends, and then somehow get to class on time. My butt would hit the seat hard just as the bell rang.

But even in Del Mar's hugeness, I always seemed to walk by Raymond between classes. He wasn't actually speaking to me but his cold stares made me catch my breath in fear and walk a little faster. *Only two more years,* I thought, *and he will be out of here.*

Every time I walked by him and his little tough guy friends, they would stop talking and wait for me to pass. He had done a good job of turning the whole neighborhood against me, and he was now working on everyone who would listen at school. He never smiled or asked me how I was doing. He just stood straight up when he saw me, making himself appear taller, with his chest pumped out like a peacock. I knew if I could just find a big bad boyfriend, Raymond would leave me alone. My mother still felt sorry for him, so she was no help. Soon after that Raymond caught me alone coming out of the house on my way to school and confronted me.

"I took you to see The Beatles," he said. "I could have taken anybody else but I took you." He spit "you" out as if I had never been worthy of all the others before me.

Raymond's dad had gotten seven tickets for The Beatles concert the summer before last. Ray gave me one of the tickets for me for my birthday, and the rest of the tickets went to neighborhood kids.

The Beatle's performed on August 19, 1964, three days after my thirteenth birthday. His dad dropped us all off in his station wagon at the Cow Palace in South San Francisco. Even though I had been to dances at school, this was like

going out on a real date with Raymond, which wasn't something I was allowed to do yet. When The Beatles finally came out on stage some time after 9:00, the only thing we could hear was screaming, so we left our seats to try to get closer. Our seats were so high and so far back that The Beatles looked like tiny little penguins in a shooting gallery.

When we moved closer to the stage, we noticed a line of people getting autographs from someone. Raymond said, "It's Shirley Temple." He ran and found a paper bag on the ground and tore a piece of the bag large enough for me to get her autograph. We couldn't hear The Beatles anyway, so we ended up standing in line to get Shirley Temple's autograph instead. And then The Beatles were gone—whisked away for the next stop on their tour. We heard later that they left in an ambulance because so many girls had swarmed their limousine.

Raymond and I had a lot of good times, but we had also had a lot of fights and we were too young to be fighting. Fighting was for marriage, not for kids. I stood staring into his face. I could only see the face of a young boy—a young boy who at one time had been everything to me, and now, I just wanted to get away from him and never see him again. All I could do was cry, and then, the slap. I almost went unconscious. He had actually chipped one of my teeth. Getting slapped brought back all the memories I had carried around with me of my parents fighting and watching Uncle Rick beat up Aunt Pat, and I knew that even at the threat of death, I would never go back to Raymond.

We hadn't seen Daddy since last Christmas. He knew that mom was dating an ex-football player, so with the exception of today, he was not likely to drop in unexpectedly. Cliff Lucas had also been visiting on the weekends, but with him being married, I knew that he and Mom were just friends. Since Mom had worked with him at Gus Mozart Volkswagen, Cliff had taken us under his wing. But big bad Daddy was the only one who could intimidate Raymond. *I will have to somehow let the neighborhood know that Daddy is here,* I thought. *And I will let them know that Daddy came home for one reason and one reason only—to make Raymond stop talking about me to his friends.*

The last few summers had been different now that Mickey and I were getting older. We weren't as dependent on Daddy, or even Mom's friends, for a good time anymore, if one could actually call spending time with Daddy a good time. And even though Daddy still didn't give us enough money, Mom made more than she used to, and we were able to have a little more fun without his help. Daddy had cancelled last summer's visit the day before we were supposed to leave for Los Angeles. Cindy cried, but Mickey and I were elated to be able to stay home. Neither one of us wanted to leave our friends for an entire week to hang out in Disneyland and Knott's Berry Farm, getting caught up in all of his Los Angeles drama. The three of us had been scheduled to leave on an airplane the day after the last day of school. Without Mom there, we knew we wouldn't feel safe. It wasn't like he would hurt us. It was more like we were afraid of being left

somewhere by ourselves—abandoned in a strange place with people we didn't know—out of control.

Now, what to do about Daddy? I heard a door close in the back of the house and then bare footsteps walking in the hall. I peeked around the corner and down the long dark hallway to see Daddy's tall skinny white body glowing in the dark wearing only boxer shorts and coming right toward me. He didn't see me at first and then startled he said, "Hey, Annie Joy, what's doin'? I'll be out in a minute." He closed the door to the bathroom behind him.

I went into the kitchen to wash last night's dishes that were soaking in the sink, wondering why he didn't use Mom's bathroom, and just as I was placing the last dish in the drainer, Daddy strolled into the kitchen buttoning up his shirt. He leaned over to kiss me. "So how's school goin'?"

"Fine." I said.

"You started high school this year didn't ya?"

"Yea. It's fun. I could use some new clothes though." I said as I walked around the kitchen drying dishes and glasses and putting them away.

"Where's your brother?" he asked.

"He doesn't get out of school until 3:30. Now that I am in high school, I get out at 3:10, so we get home at different times."

"Oh okay, well." He stopped and looked around the room running his fingers through his hair like he was planning his next move. He grabbed his breast pocket and then the front and back pockets of his pants, finally locating

the pack of cigarettes and a lighter he was searching for. He lit his cigarette, sucking in the smoke as he opened cupboard doors looking for an ashtray. I opened the cupboard, where the ashtrays were kept and handed him one. He stood by the grey Formica table (the same table I saw him marking cards at) staring out the window at our unkempt backyard. He sat down on one of the chairs. "I thought maybe I could take you guys out for dinner tonight," he said. "We could go over to that new pizza place they just opened over on Meridian."

He didn't say anything about my clothes request, and I started thinking about last year when he told me that if I wear nice clothes, it didn't matter what I looked like. It sounded as if he were telling me that I wasn't very pretty and that I still have a chance if I at least wear nice clothes. I had a love/hate relationship with clothes. I loved them because they seemed to make me more popular with the boys, and with my friends, but I hated them because I had to beg for the money to buy them. I knew that Daddy dated women who wore tight shiny pants and high heels, meaning that he preferred women who looked like whores. That my dad lived with or dated prostitutes was not a surprise to me. It went along with his lifestyle and probably why he needed all the money he wasn't giving us.

At school we were not allowed to wear pants. We were required to wear dresses everyday with only an occasional dress-down day. The dean prowled the halls with her measuring stick and when she saw someone with a dress or skirt that looked a bit too short, she made that person get on her knees and she measured from the concrete to the hem of the dress.

Oh well. The heck with the clothes, what I really needed was a boyfriend or for Daddy to come to my aid right now with Raymond, I thought.

"Yea, that's Shakey's Pizza," I said. "When Mickey gets home, you can ask him if he has time to go. We weren't expecting you." And then I thought about what Mom said about stalling him so she could talk to him. "I mean—I am sure he will want to go when he finds out that you surprised us."

The way he was sitting reminded me of the time I was trying to get him to buy me some new school clothes seven or eight years ago, I couldn't even remember now how long ago it was: His right arm across the table, legs spread apart, looking around the kitchen like he expected something to happen any minute, sucking air through his teeth and then a puff on his cigarette. He took some quarters out of his pocket and separated them into two piles with one hand. He shuffled the quarters making one pile and then separated them and shuffled again. This is something he did when he was bored or nervous, which was most of the time when he was around us. It was like he had absolutely nothing in common with us and had to occupy his time with some mundane task. But it always fascinated me to watch him handle quarters or a deck of cards and I wondered how many nights he stayed up until all hours of the morning to get this to work out just right. But I didn't want him to know that I was impressed, so I continued to busy myself in the kitchen trying to ignore the giraffe in the room.

He sat up straight and pulled a deck of cards out of his pocket, removing them from the box so carefully as if they were made of eggshells. As an

afterthought, he grabbed a towel from the counter and wiped his hands so as not to get the cards oily. He split the deck in half and shuffled them perfectly with the precision of what I had come to know from all card sharks. Watching him handle a deck of cards relaxed me and excited me at the same time. I didn't know why. It was that element of danger that came with being around a person from a third world country, but that I was too afraid to think about because of what might happen to me if I knew too much.

I finally sat down at the table to watch him. I waited because I thought he was going to show me a magic trick. Instead, he dealt one card to me face down, and then one for himself face down and then to me face down. The forth card he dealt to himself face up—the queen of hearts. I lifted up the ends of my two cards slightly—the five of spades and the nine of hearts. I remembered when he came for Confirmation Sunday and we went back to our house. He tried to teach me how to play Black Jack and I was now trying to think about the rules of the game. I knew not to hit on anything over fourteen especially when the dealer had a queen showing. I turned over my cards. His other card was the ace of spades. *How did I know?* I thought. *Blackjack!*

"I have homework to do," I said as I got up.

"Hey, don't be a sore loser," he said. "One more time. You'll win this time, I promise."

My dad hated losing and I knew that no matter how much he had taught me about doubling down and not hitting over fourteen, I would still lose. I shook

my head remembering the time he turned over a Scrabble board because he had the lowest score. Scrabble tiles went everywhere. He just walked outside to have a cigarette, leaving us to pick up the mess he had made without any kind of apology. Grandma Wagle just looked at him and shook her head. “Oh, Danny,” she said. “Uff da.”

“No really,” I said. “I have a lot of homework to do and if you want me to go out for pizza with you, I need to get it done.”

The front door opened and I heard heavy feet running down the hall.

“Mickey,” I yelled. I stepped into the hallway when I heard him starting to leave the house again, baseball mitt in hand.

“What?” He said, irritated that he had to stop and talk to me.

“Daddy’s in the kitchen.”

He stood for a minute looking at me—his big brown eyes wide with surprise. He walked into the kitchen.

“Hey, Pops!” Mickey said as he walked over and gave Daddy a stiff hug. Mickey was in the seventh grade now and he was almost as tall as Daddy.

“You’re gettin big, kid,” Daddy said. “Look at you. You’re almost as tall as I am.”

“Whatryadoin’ here?” Mickey asked out of breath.

“Not much. I just came to see you kids. I got a ride up from a friend. I thought I’d take you guys out for pizza.”

“Okay,” Mickey said. “I’m gonna play baseball out in front. What time? Do you wanna play with us?” Mickey asked hopeful that Daddy would say yes.

“No. You guys go have fun. We’ll leave in a couple hours when your mother gets home. Annie has homework to do.”

“Howrwegonna get there?” Mickey asked.

“Mummy will be home early. We can drive over in her car.”

“Oh yea,” Mickey said remembering now that we actually had a drivable car.

Mickey turned to leave and then turned back when he saw the deck of cards sitting on the table. “You playin cards tonight pops?”

“No. I’m just here to give your mother some money and then I’m driving right back with Frank. He’s gonna pick me up about seven.”

Mickey sat down at the table and set his glove down. “Let’s play a few hands instead. The guys can wait.”

Daddy shuffled the deck and finished the deal with his ace of hearts showing. Mickey peeked at his cards and said, “Hit me,” and Daddy dealt him the nine of clubs. Mickey turned over his cards to show that he already had the eight of diamonds and the seven spades. “Whatryadoin’ Moke?” Daddy asked. “I told you never to hit on anything over fourteen especially when you can see that I have a face card or an ace showing.” Daddy looked at Mickey disgusted and then turned over his other card. It was the three of spades and with the nine that he would have taken on the next hit, Daddy would have busted.

"I gotta go," Mickey said as he grabbed his mitt and ran out the front door.

I turned around and walked toward my room knowing that I took the chance on him leaving without telling us and then Mom wouldn't get any money. *Too bad.* I thought. *Bringing up my grades is more important.* I decided to walk back into the living room and peek out the window to see who Mickey was playing baseball with. I moved the center drapes slightly so no one could see me, something I was forbidden to do when Mom was home. She hated smudges on the drapes from our dirty fingers. Mickey was talking to the two new guys who had moved in across the street, (two more people who weren't speaking to me), and Raymond, Wayne Moltzon, and some guys down the street who were closer to Mickey's age. I strained to hear what they were saying. Mickey was telling them something—probably that the big shot was here. *Good,* I thought. *Maybe they'll be a little nicer to me if they know that big bad Daddy is home.*

At the pizza parlor, Daddy made a big show of giving Mom three hundred dollars. Mom thanked him and reminded him that he still owes her a lot more. Mickey, Cindy and I sat quietly and ate our pizza knowing they wouldn't yell at each other and make a scene in a restaurant. Daddy tried to make pleasant conversation with us, but Mickey and I just had yes and no answers for him. Cindy, on the other hand, made sure she told him everything she had been doing since she saw him last in May. She was in the fourth grade now and her teacher was constantly calling the house telling Mom how disruptive she was in class. She had moved Cindy from one end of the classroom to the other, and she had

nowhere else in the room to place her. Cindy just wanted to socialize with anyone and everyone.

When we were finished with our pizza—Cindy had barely touched hers—Frank Delposo walked into Shakey's and then over to our table. He kissed and hugged Mom like they were old friends and said, "Hi, kids." Daddy got up and took a wad of cash out of his pocket, throwing a five-dollar bill on the table for the tip. He walked around the table to kiss us all goodbye, and he locked Mom into a kiss as if they were still married and he was going to see her later. This time, though, Mom pulled away and just looked up at him with a cold stare. And then he left with Frank. And just that easy, he was gone and we had no idea when we would see him again. I wasn't glad to see him come, and now I wasn't glad to see him go. I didn't know how I felt anymore. I didn't know how I felt about Raymond and I didn't know if I wanted Daddy to go or stay. I just knew that, at that moment, I felt empty about his leaving. I needed him to be more involved in my life, and I knew that when he walked out the door of Shakey's Pizza, he would be so wrapped up in his own life, he would forget that I even existed.

I wondered how a person who had turned out like he had, could have been raised on a farm in Cooperstown, North Dakota, by hard working Norwegian farmers. Sitting in Shakey's Pizza, abandoned by the person who was supposed to love me the most, abandoned by a father whom I didn't understand, I wondered how he could just walk away from his children, not caring if they got home from school safely, or had something to eat, or a roof over their

heads. It was one thing to walk away from his wife for whatever reason, but his children? I knew that Daddy's parents hadn't raised him like that. They didn't walk away from their kids. They didn't even walk away from them as adults.

They were always home when any of us needed a meal or a place to sleep. Grandpa came home everyday after work. Grandma knew where Grandpa was going everyday when he left the house. How could Daddy, raised by Grandma and Grandpa, just leave his kids to go play cards in some smoky stinky card room when he could paint and hang wallpaper with Grandpa and come home early every night to spend time with us? And then Mom could stay home and cook and clean instead of leaving us alone everyday.

I sat at the table feeling stunned and alone. I couldn't eat another bite. Cindy was going on and on about something that had happened on the playground that day. I could feel my face getting hot and my eyes starting to burn. I turned away and wiped the tears off of my cheeks so Mom wouldn't be able to see me cry. My throat had such a big knot in it, I wondered if anyone could see it sticking straight out of my neck, so I started clearing my throat, hoping that the lump would go away.

By Christmas that year I had fallen madly in love with a tall senior with big muscles. Bill Yowell was very popular with all of the girls. Marlene, one of my girlfriends from church introduced us in the halls at Del Mar. Marlene was going steady with Tad Coatsworth, who was a friend of Bill's. I actually didn't know him

or even know of him until we met that day at school. He offered Marlene and me a ride home. He told us that he had just bought a '37 Chevy Coup that he wanted to show us. I had no idea what he was talking about. I just knew that most of the guys who were driving had old cars that they were fixing up and dragging the main on Friday nights.

When Bill dropped me off, I thanked him for the ride and waved goodbye to him and Marlene and didn't think another thing about him. I only hoped that Raymond saw me get out of his car. But then I started seeing Bill everywhere at school. And I wondered why I kept seeing him now because I knew I had never seen him before. He always said hi and sometimes when I was running through the halls to get to class on time he would yell for me to slow down. I started to think that he must be flirting with me, but why would he do that when he had so many other girlfriends? And he was so much older than I was.

Then Bill and Tad and Marlene came by our house one afternoon to see if I wanted to go with them to the House of Pizza downtown. I had to call my mother, of course. She finally agreed to let me go if Marlene was going to be there the whole time. Little did she know that I had to sit scrunched against Bill while Marlene sat on Tad's lap. After that, Bill just kept coming around and finally met my mother one afternoon when she came home early.

Bill had a job working nights on the weekends at the Bayshore Drive-In on North First Street, so I only saw him in the afternoons or at school. By November The Mamas and The Papas released *California Dreamin'* and it became our

song. Mom let me go out with him only if we were in a group, so if we wanted to be alone, we had to lie. The most important thing was that Raymond knew that I was now untouchable. I was dating a senior who drove a car, and I was no longer afraid of him.

Bill was very studious, and I knew that he must never know what my grades had been in my first quarter of high school. I swore my mother to secrecy and made sure that I studied hard and got my homework done everyday after school. Bill was trying to get into any state college that was out of town—preferably Chico State. I didn't know at the time that Chico was a big party school.

I worried about what Bill would think of me after he met my dad and found out what he did for a living. Bill's dad worked for the Department of Food and Agriculture. His mother stayed home and cleaned the house and cooked and raised her three boys. One of the boys, Rick, was my age and the other, Allen, a year older than I was. They were a nice family who owned a ranch style home off of Hamilton Avenue. And even though I helped Mom clean the house every Saturday, our house could never be as nice or smell like apples and cookies and coffee the way that theirs did—the way Grandma Wagle's house smelled. At our house, Mickey mowed the lawn whenever he felt like it, so our yard never looked as nice as our neighbor's houses or Bill's house did. Bill didn't seem to care though. Mom liked him because he came in the house and talked to her.

Bill wanted to be a schoolteacher after college and suddenly, after not wanting to get married and have kids, I wanted to marry Bill and have all twelve of his children.

Chapter VI

I've Changed My Mind . . . Again

Being a freshman had its moments—good and bad. I often asked myself why I couldn't just go to sleep and wake up zapped into my junior year—like Daddy says "Magic!" Poof! First you see the Ace of Spades and then, with one flick of the wrist, it becomes the Queen of Hearts. And I didn't just need a big bad boyfriend; I needed independence from my mother more than ever. I hated sneaking around, cutting school, coming home, keeping a ladder attached to the back of the house in case she came home for lunch. And while we were up there waiting for her to go back to work I wondered what would happen if she came out in the back yard and saw the ladder. Would she move it? And what if it started raining? Would Debbie Seese and I die if we slipped off of a wet roof and fell one story into the weeds we called our back yard? And always the question, how long would we be stuck up there? What if Mom was actually home for the rest of the day because she was sick? If we had a car, we could go to Carmel or Sausalito when we cut school.

The only reason I even still lived at home was that I didn't have any money, but that was easily fixed. I would find a job. I could do anything: type, sew, babysit, iron, clean people's houses. I could do all of that stuff and make good money. Fifty cents an hour was the going rate for babysitting. For house cleaning, I could get at least seventy-five cents. My mother had rich friends that would hire me. I just needed to put the word out there. I only needed money for

rent and food anyway, and how much could *that* cost; fifty dollars a month for a studio apartment, and I have always said that I would prefer to live on Swanson's chicken pies and Cheerios anyway.

But when Bill asked me to go to Del Mar's Senior Ball with him in March, I didn't have to worry about where I would get the money to buy a dress and shoes. I had been a bridesmaid in my cousin Cathy's wedding on Valentine's Day, and I would wear the dress I had worn in the wedding again to the Senior Ball. In honor of the holiday, Cathy had picked out red dresses and shoes. The sleeveless empire waist with brocade bodice and a long chiffon skirt over satin, including the dyed red shoes, cost my mother $39.00. Mom loaned me a pair of her long white gloves. I wore my hair up—tightly ratted and then layered softly in little petals. The only problem was with the dress, because while the color red was appropriate for a Valentine's Day wedding, I felt uncomfortable wearing it as a freshman going to a Senior Ball. The color had certain associations, like for instance whores wear red when they're trolling Second Street. The girls in high school who wore red might as well just stand in the main quad yelling to anyone who would listen, "I'm a whore. I will sleep with anyone and everyone."

The ball was held at the Elk's Lodge in Los Gatos. And then, the after ball was held at the Los Gatos Swim and Racket Club. For that, I wore a beige lace suit that belonged to my mother. So you could say that if I looked like a whore at the ball, I looked like a young woman who wanted to be a nun and going to her first interview with other wannabe nuns for the after ball.

We danced slow dances the whole night to Oldies But Goodies like Richie Valens's *Oh Donna,* Elvis Presley's *Love Me Tender,* and the newly released *Norwegian Wood* by the Beatles. This group of seniors liked the slow stuff. The after-ball was a bit more rowdy with Little Richard's *Good Golly Miss Molly,* and Bobby Darin's *Splish Splash,* but Bill and I spent the later part of the night, into the early morning hours, strolling around the swimming pool, feeling like we had stolen an entire night together and wanted to enjoy every minute. We ate breakfast at Ken's House of Pancakes on Hamilton Avenue with another couple, and Bill reluctantly drove me home to a waiting, stayed-up-all-night worried mother.

Nonetheless, I felt very grown up hanging out with seniors. Bill had a lot of friends who could not figure out why he was dating a fourteen-year-old child when he could have asked any upper class more mature girl. There were girls out there who had never even gone to a ball and would not be able to go to their own senior ball, and now me, a freshman, had somehow wangled my way into the heart of a senior for one reason, and one reason only—to get asked to the senior ball, or at least so they thought. But Bill would be off to college soon and so would the rest of the senior class, so who cares what they thought?

I started the year with Raymond making me feel like I owed him something, and for that, he had made my life a living hell, and now I am ending the year with the jealous glares of girls I hope I never ever see again.

I knew that after the ball they would all be whispering about how I wore red and what it must mean; that I had become Bill's whore. I could hear my eighth grade homeroom teacher's voice talking about how "good girls" don't wear a lot of make up, and they dress conservatively, and they certainly don't go out of the house blatantly wearing red without paying the price of wagging tongues, and the "natural" look is in right now, and on and on and on. And then of course, I could hear Pastor Carlson's voice talk about the example that good Christians should set. Grandma Wagle would chime in at the same time and she would say, "God loves you." *God only loves good girls, not girls that date older boys, not girls that wear red when they should be wearing white, not girls who talk back to their mothers, not girls who hate their fathers, not girls who cut school and lie to their mothers,* I thought. I had done myself in, and my sophomore year with Bill going off to college, abandoning me like my dad had done, was going to be a living hell.

Fortunately, Ray had disappeared and was only a memory now from my distant past. Well, my distant past a little over six months ago. Now that I was dating a senior, I was somewhat mobile if my driver didn't have to work. And it would not be long before I didn't have to depend on my boyfriend or friends for rides; I would get a job and buy a car of my own and move into my own apartment.

Of course, then there was the Mickey problem. Mickey started the seventh grade at Blackford Junior High School on Leigh Avenue when I began my freshman year at Del Mar. He was doing typical seventh-grade boy stuff. In other words, alone without the help of a man, Mom struggled to keep him in line. And I didn't help the situation, because Mickey was a tease and a pest, and I didn't care what he did as long as it didn't include me, or my friends. I just wanted him out of my hair, and I didn't want him hiding behind the couch when Bill and I were making out.

Daddy tried to discipline him when he made one of his guest appearances, but when Daddy left (and he always left) Mickey went back to doing whatever *he* wanted to do. Mickey had one thing going for him though—his math test scores. According to his teacher, Mickey's math scores were off the charts. He was either going to follow in Daddy's footsteps and become a card shark, doubling down on a Black Jack table in Lake Tahoe, or he would go to college and become a mathematician; and I had no idea what he would do with that sort of a degree to support himself. I didn't get the whole math thing. I prided myself on being a bookworm geek. My heart always beat a little faster when I broke down complicated sentences in freshman English. Mickey's scores were hard for Mom to understand because he made C's and D's in math on his report cards.

Mom knew now, from talking to the teacher, that Mickey had potential, but he just didn't want to apply himself and do the required work to pull up his

grades. The only thing that Mickey wanted to do was hang out with his friends and play baseball. Everyday, when Mom came home from work, life at our house was just one big argument after another. The only reason that Mickey even came home was that he was hungry and tired from fooling around all day. We may as well have been living with Daddy for all the stress that he caused. Finally, my uncle Dave and his wife, Pam, came up with a really good suggestion for Mickey during the summer, just before he started the eighth grade. They offered to have him come and live with them.

Uncle Dave and Aunt Pam had just moved onto a small ranch up on Idylwild Drive in the Santa Cruz Mountains. The house was small, but they had a large piece of property where they raised burros, and they said that Mickey would be a big help taking care of them. Mickey could attend the eighth grade at Fisher Middle School in Los Gatos and Mom assumed that Mickey would sleep on their couch. Mickey needed a change like this to turn his life around. At least that was what everyone was saying.

Uncle Dave had been in the Air Force and then went to Syracuse University in New York. As a civilian, Uncle Dave sported the ivy-league look with madras shirts and khaki pants. Rumor had it that he had a pile of once-worn shirts in his apartment that he handed over to the Salvation Army regularly. Rather than having to wash and iron his shirts, he would wear a new shirt until it got dirty and throw it into the dirty-shirt pile. When he let his hair grow out from

the crew cut he was required to wear in the Air Force, he became strikingly handsome with his blue eyes and the cutest freckled nose I had ever seen.

From Syracuse he had intended to go to medical school and become a doctor, but before he finished college, he came home to Grandma and Grandpa Wagle, who had recently bought a home in Saratoga off of Quito Road, and just never went back to his apartment in New York. Maybe it was the pile of unwashed shirts that made him not want to return. And who wouldn't want to stay home with Grandma? She washed and ironed your clothes, cooked your meals, and cleaned up after you. She smelled like peppermint, White Shoulders, and a pot of fresh coffee. She made the most delicious brown gravies from scratch that I have ever tasted. She mashed potatoes with a potato masher lump free. And she served Norwegian pancakes regularly with mounds of butter, and boysenberry and loganberry syrups. And then if she had leftover mashed potatoes, we could always count on her making lefse the next day. She cleaned her bathrooms everyday. Who wouldn't want to stay with Grandma forever and ever?

When Uncle Dave came home, he started hanging out with his brother, my Uncle John, (a Ricky Nelson lookalike) who was also living at home since he had separated from his wife. The two of them had so many girlfriends that the telephone, unfortunately for Grandma, rang off the hook. I even had to lie for Uncle Dave occasionally when I was there if he didn't want to pick up the phone.

Grandma told him that if he wanted her to tell his girlfriends that he wasn't home, he had to go outside and close the door behind him.

Then one day Uncle Dave met a beautiful sweet girl named Pam. She was in her twenties and from a nice family who lived in Los Altos. That was it for Uncle Dave. No more girls. No more lying. Uncle Dave and Aunt Pam were married in one month from the day they met. Grandpa Wagle gave Uncle Dave a job hanging wallpaper, and the newly married couple started a family almost immediately.

For Mickey, it all sounded so perfect. And for Mom and Cindy and I, we could live without the hassles of having a lazy eighth grader around who didn't do his chores and we had to pick up after, or at least *I* had to begrudgingly pick up after. It would just be the three of us. I would no longer have to leave three-by-five cards scotch taped all over the house that said things like "Don't put garbage in the fireplace," "Flush the toilet and put the seat down," "Wash your own dishes," "Ice cube trays don't have reproductive organs," etc. etc. Mickey would be out of our hair for good now.

Uncle Dave would be a great role model for Mickey, and what made Mom the happiest was that Mickey could still attend school on the west side. Aunt Pam had two little girls and one on the way, so she could stay home and make sure that Mickey was taken care of properly, and she would also make sure that he earned his keep by taking care of the burros and helping out with chores.

So while Mickey made the move to Idylwild Drive in August, I rode with Bill in his Chevy coup, and his mother took Bill's brothers in her car to Chico State where we left him at his dorm, and then I drove straight back the same day with his mother and brothers. I trembled uncontrollably all the way home. I had no problem imagining my life without Mickey, but I could not imagine my life without Bill. With a ginormous lump in my throat, I said goodbye to Bill's mom and his brothers when she dropped me off at home, and I told her that I would visit whenever I could. I told Allen and Bob that I would see them at school, and then walked into the open arms of my mother who would miss Bill too.

My sophomore year was filled with the same busy schedule as my freshman year, except that our class had moved up a notch on the totem pole. Bill came home for Thanksgiving and then Christmas. I had become used to not seeing him and occupied my time with church and school functions and did my best to satisfy myself with our phone calls every few days. But when I racked up a $54.00 phone bill, for which I had to pay my mother back with babysitting and housecleaning money, the calls slowed down on my end, and I had to wait for Bill to call me. Unfortunately, he had the same problem as I did, calling me from a pay phone. So every time we could finally talk on the phone, those few moments became painful and agonizing instead of happy and cheerful.

Daddy popped in on Christmas Eve only to meet Bill and drop off gifts. I had told Bill and any friends who had asked about my dad that he lived in Los

Angeles and that he painted houses and hung wallpaper for a living. Knowing that, Bill seemed a little surprised at how Daddy was dressed and that his hands were soft and beautifully manicured, not to mention the Italian leather shoes, the sparkly jewelry, and gold slacks with matching shirt (obviously expensive) he wore.

Bill stayed home for two weeks at Christmas time, and Mom asked him if he would drive us to Pasadena for the Rose Parade. So the five us crowded into Mom's little white Volkswagen with Bill driving, Mom riding shotgun, and Mickey, Cindy and I squished into the back seat. We stayed at Auntie Ona and Uncle Don's house. They had started a tradition of attending the parade every year from the time they moved down south in 1959. This was the third time that we had gone to the parade with them.

I could feel myself pulling away from Bill now, blaming him for abandoning me and not attending San Jose State instead of Chico. It seemed easier to say goodbye to him this time as he went back to school. He was in the way now of my school and church activities. The phone calls between us almost stopped all together, and at the beginning of the third quarter in January, I met a senior in my typing class named Ron Troncatty.

Ron drove a 1965 dark green Pontiac GTO. He was an orphan from Yuba City living with his brother and his brother's wife. His parents' premature death left Ron and his brother independently wealthy, but it was agreed that Ron would live with his brother until he graduated from high school. Ron wanted to play golf

professionally and be an actor when he grew up. He looked like a cross between Paul Newman and Marlon Brando. So for better looks I traded up. The break up between Bill and me was painful, but we agreed to stay friends and to see what happens.

So, off to the Senior Ball I went—again. But this time I made a simple ankle-length white brocade dress with an empire waste and a full-length coat to match. The dress exposed my shoulders with cut outs on each side of my chest and back. My mother's new boyfriend, Cliff Lucas, the man she met when she worked at Gus Mozart Volkswagen, paid for the material, and instead of the whore I felt like when I wore red at last year's Senior Ball, this time I felt like Cinderella.

Ron and I doubled with a friend of his named Scott MacKenzie and his girlfriend Sherrie Welker. Like Ron, Scott also wanted to be an actor. Scott had premature grey hair, and was really cute. Just before the ball, Scott came by our house when Bill was in Yuba City on family business. I was attempting to hem my ball gown and coat by myself, and when I answered the door in my gown, obviously struggling, he told me that he helps his sister hem her clothes all the time. (A sure sign of feminism on its way). "Go and get the shoes you will be wearing," he said. And to my surprise, he then guided me onto one of our dining room chairs and then onto the table. He took the pins away from me and proceeded to pin the hem of the dress and then the coat. "Look straight ahead," he said. "Don't look down, or you will screw up the hem line." Scott went on to

be a famous tuxedo model for a popular *Bride* magazine after he graduated from high school.

When the night of the ball finally came, Ron picked me up, and Mom told me later that he had a jaw-dropping look on his face when he saw me, and that was all I needed or wanted—approval from a man. I wore my hair long and flowing, straight but with a slight curl, so different from last year's bouffant look.

We ate dinner at Charlie Brown's Steakhouse—a popular place for prom night goers. When we got to the ball, I looked around the room at all of the friends I had made this year, especially with this senior graduating class of 1967, and unlike the seniors that graduated in 1966, I realized that I was going to miss this class. This would be their last high school party and those of us lucky enough to attend this ball really wanted to celebrate. We did a dance called the Jerk all night to Jr. Walker and the All Star's *Shot Gun,* and any other song we could do the Jerk to. I looked for Raymond, but I didn't see him. Guess he didn't go. No one dressed up for the after ball, because if there even was one, we didn't go to it. We went home and changed into our jeans and went to several house parties instead, and then breakfast at Ken's House of Pancakes.

Unfortunately, I wasn't the only one who ended the school year in turmoil. Mickey also had problems, but his problems would change his living arrangements. One Sunday afternoon, some time in April, my Uncle Don and Auntie Ona came from Pasadena and visited Uncle Dave and Aunt Pam's little burro farm in the Santa Cruz Mountains where Mickey now lived. Uncle Don and

Auntie One were horrified that Mickey was actually sleeping on a dirt floor covered with straw in a stable in the exact same spot where he tied up the burros at night. Of course, this news made its way as the crow flies to Mom's ears and quoting Mom, "All hell broke loose."

Mom had become suspicious when Mickey came home one weekend and complained about some pain he was experiencing in the back of his neck. Mom saw a large black growth popping out of the area. She immediately took Mickey to the emergency room where the doctor on duty held the end of a lit cigarette to the growth and Mom watched a large black tic, filled with Mickey's blood, back out of Mickey's neck, butt first. Mom's boss told her that this was normal under Mickey's living conditions.

But now finding out where he actually slept at night, Mom put a plan into motion to remove Mickey immediately from Uncle Dave and Aunt Pam's house. And while she didn't want to make problems with Daddy's family, she called Grandma and Grandpa Wagle to let them know what was going on. Grandma and Grandpa went straight up to Idywild Drive, packed up Mickey's few belongings and brought him back to their house in Saratoga. Grandpa took Mickey to school every day so he could finish out the school year and then the plan was for Mickey to move back home with us.

The living conditions were completely different with Grandma than they were with Uncle Dave and Aunt Pam, or even with us for that matter. Grandma made Mickey's bed everyday, and he went to school on a stomach filled with her

incredibly yummy Norwegian pancakes. But Mickey's experience, sleeping with donkeys in a stable, changed him—to say the least. When he finally moved back home with us, we could clearly see that he had developed a new respect for crisp clean sheets and hot delicious meals cooked by his big sister and his mother. For watching television on a couch. And for not only bathrooms with toilets, but also *clean* bathrooms with *clean* toilets. A nice warm house. Companionship. Fighting with his sisters—not so much now. This is not to say that from then on he didn't get into trouble. It is to say that we covered for each other now, and we both kept a close eye on Cindy, so as not to allow her to have the same kinds of fun we were having.

Mom and I always provided the things that Mickey took for granted and that Aunt Pam had never quite mastered. But Mom and I had changed too. We started to miss Mickey while he was gone and on this journey of doing without even the basics as he learned to appreciate the little things that became so important to him. We were a family again and the three of us spent more time together. I no longer wanted to move out of the house. And while Mickey didn't always do his chores, which still made me angry, the four of us developed a camaraderie that hadn't existed before. Mickey, taller now with a deeper voice, assumed his new role as man of the house, ready to start his freshman year at Del Mar High School.

We only spoke to Daddy over the phone now, and the conversations were brief at best. Mickey and I were busy with school and our friends. We had little time for Daddy, and he didn't seem to care. As far as our friends were concerned, Daddy still lived in Los Angeles, and he still painted houses and hung wallpaper.

Mom was dating Cliff Lucas, and even though Cliff was married, he became a huge part of our lives, helping Mom with finances whenever she needed it. Cliff had three children: Christine, who was my age, Jeannine, who was a year older than Mickey, and Matthew, five. The girls went to Westmont High School. We didn't know them but Cliff used to bring Matt over on weekends. The plan was that Matt would get a little older and Cliff would leave his wife, and then marry Mom. Cliff was the type of man who kept his word, unlike our father, and he did. By the time I was nineteen and Matt was nine, Mom and Cliff got married. And they truly lived happily ever after.

Chapter VII

A Day at the Track

Standing on my tiptoes, I could see him now, towering over the travelers as he sauntered quickly through the maze to me—his long legs maneuvering around luggage and baby strollers and those who lumbered along in no particular hurry. Daddy was always in a hurry even when he didn't have to be anywhere, he rushed.

Our eyes caught in a dazzling light show. It wasn't that we *wouldn't* let go of this rare moment; it was that we *couldn't* let go of this rare moment. I had matured a whole year and a half since I saw him last. Still five feet two, still 103 pounds, but smaller waist, bigger hips and breasts, shaped like my mother, but with the Wagle Norwegian face, tiny nose with no bridge, higher cheek bones—also like my mother and my Norwegian Auntie Ona. Mutual admiration had taken over. Maybe that was what attracted us to each other. Maybe it was that we liked our own looks so much that when we saw our own reflection we couldn't stop looking, like we had just done our hair differently and couldn't believe that we had worn it any other way—ever.

We continued staring into the mirror that was now in front of us like two egomaniacs. Unfortunately, this euphoria didn't last long—not more than about sixty seconds anyway. Maybe that old saying that I had heard so many times when Bill was in Chico was really true. Maybe absence *does* make the heart grow fonder. Maybe absence makes the brain temporarily forget all of the crappy

things that the missing person has done *to* them or hasn't done *for* them. Because now after the eye-popping attraction was all over all I could see, all I could focus on, were Daddy's big white teeth. He looked like our Keeshond, Duke, after Mickey and I had spent hours teaching him how to smile. Daddy and I both laughed now at the thought of what the other might be thinking. He leaned down to kiss me on the lips and pull me up into his long arms to hold me as tight as he could.

Still holding me he pulled away slightly so he could look at my face. "So. You still mad at your old man?" He asked.

Without skipping a beat, still looking into his eyes I said, "I'd be less mad if you'd give Mom more money."

He pulled completely away now. "Is that all you broads think about—money?"

"Actually, no, I was wondering about your teeth." I frowned and squinted my eyes trying to get a better look. "Are they new?" I asked sarcastically.

He smiled wide to show them off. "Yea, whataya think?"

"You look like Duke. I think you should tell your dentist to tone them down a bit."

"Now whataya have to talk to me like that for, Annie Joy?" he said. "I don't talk to you like that."

I just rolled my eyes and we started walking toward the parking lot. The San Jose Airport wasn't crowded at this time of day as it always was in the late afternoon, or early morning.

"So where's this new car of yours?" He asked.

I was sixteen, almost seventeen, and in the space of time that I hadn't seen him I had written him a five-page, single-spaced letter telling him what a shitty father he was, and then when I found out that he had been arrested on my sixteenth birthday, I felt bad. *Why did I feel bad?* I wondered. *I wasn't the one that sold a trunk-load of reds and whites to the FBI that day.*

This was the first time I had ever picked him up at the airport. I had gotten my driver's license about two weeks after my sixteenth birthday. I failed the test the first time because I had backed my mother's Volkswagen over the curb when I was trying to parallel park and automatically failed—so humiliating. After that, a friend of my mother's took me out and showed me how to flawlessly parallel park. For the second try he thought it best not to take the old Volkswagen that Mickey and I had just bought for obvious reasons—Mom's car was newer and more dependable, and we didn't want the DMV tester to think we were a bunch of white trash lowlifes and then look for any little excuse to fail me again.

This time I backed the car into the space after lining up the rear of the car with the front of the car in back of me, pulled forward one time and Voila! My car lined up straight and about a foot away from the curb. The DMV tester asked me which direction my wheels would be turned if I were parking uphill, then downhill.

He signed me off, and I went back into the office and picked up my temporary driver's license.

"There she is," I said, pointing to the tan (original color) 1955 Volkswagen Beetle with a working cloth sunroof, whitewall tires, and a small oval back window. I had stuck big pink flowers on the doors, trunk, and hood to give her some character. Teenagers had taken on the label of "hippies," and these pink flowers showed that I was a bona fide card-carrying hippie. Other than being old, she had one flaw; when I went over 85 on the freeway, the speedometer made such a god-awful noise that my friends and I couldn't hear the radio. Debbie Seese and I kept a wardrobe of clothes in the space behind the back seat for quick changes or for when we had stayed out all night and changed in a gas station bathroom before we went to school, telling our parents we were staying at each other's houses.

Daddy only said, "Where did you get this?" But, just the way he asked the question, I could tell that he was impressed.

"Cliff took it in in trade and sold it to Mickey and me for three hundred dollars," I said.

"Who's Cliff?" He asked.

I just rolled my eyes again without answering his stupid question. He couldn't accept that Mom was now having a serious relationship with a man that he couldn't bully.

He opened the door and scrunched himself into the front seat. “Wow, the original ‘Made in Germany’ sticker. This is impressive. I hope you take good care of this. It’ll be valuable some day.”

A few of my girlfriends had gotten their cars at the same time that Mickey and I had bought the VW, but our Beetle was the oldest and most unique. Karen DiFiore’s dad bought her a white ’66 Mustang, and we nicknamed her Mustang Sally. Susan Mannina’s parents bought her a yellow ’67 Camaro with an orange racing stripe around the nose and a vinyl orange and yellow flowered top. We nicknamed her Suzy Soul. In spite of the nicer cars my friends were receiving as gifts from their parents, everyone loved my funny little car for some strange reason, and nobody had a nickname for me that had anything to do with my car.

We headed towards Bay Meadows Racetrack on the Bayshore Freeway. Daddy’s plan was to bet on one particular horse, have calamari for a late lunch at Race Street Fish Market, and then he would be back on an airplane bound for Los Angeles by 4:00, and I could be at work on time. Today would not be one of our leisurely days at the track. I wouldn’t be able to go down to the pit and watch the horses come in and then pick out one or two that I liked. Daddy called a day at the track “work”—a job—his job. But today there was no need for him to do all of his scratching on the racing form—dry track, muddy track, weight of the horse, how many times the horse had won and on what kind of track the horse seemed to run best, and then today’s weather report had to be factored in, of course. On any ordinary day at the track, calculations needed to be made and sometimes,

just plain guesses. This was all too technical for my non-existent math skills. Today, Daddy knew which horse was going to sprint over the finish line first, and the only thing he needed to do was to be there on time, place the bet, and then collect his winnings. After the race was over, we got back in my car and headed south.

"So whenrya comin to Los Angeles to visit me?" He asked.

"I don't know, Daddy. It's really hard to get away right now with my job and school." I said.

"Yea, and all those boyfriends," he chided.

"All what boyfriends?" I asked. I took my eyes off the road to give him a good harsh look. "Have you been talking to Mom?"

"Yea, I heard something about two guys showing up at the same time and you makin hot chocolate for them in the kitchen? And who's this Harrett guy I keep hearin about?"

I rolled my eyes once again. "He's the brother of one of my best friends," I said. "Susan Mannina. *Her* dad bought her a '67 Camaro for her sixteenth birthday."

He ignored what I was implying. "And that's not all I heard," he said. "Your mother told me that you invited three guys to some dance at school?"

"I can't believe Mom tells you all this stuff. I am going to have to silence that woman," I said with irritation.

"Well, so what happened?"

"What happened to what?" I asked, playing dumb.

"The three guys and the dance. And why were you the one doing the asking. Is this some new women's lib thing girls do now? Ask boys to dances?"

He just didn't get it, nor would he ever. Girls were becoming more forward with boys now. We were liberating ourselves from the ties that had bound us to bras and corsets and behaving like ladies and kowtowing to the needs and wants of men. In Daddy's day, girls never called boys unless it was an emergency and even at that, their parents usually intervened before a girl could ever call a boy. My nana's way of settling this was a hard slap across the face if she were to catch my mother or my aunt calling boys. My mother has told me many times that calling boys or looking out the front window is a big no no, and I still wasn't completely comfortable with making the first move, but I was getting better. There were discussions now about why women should have the right to approach a man first. Helen Gurley Brown had written *Sex and the Single Girl*, which became a movie staring Natalie Wood. Brown encouraged women to become independent and sexually active, even with multiple partners.

"It was the Twirp Dance Daddy. It's kinda like the Sadie Hawkin's Dance except this dance is at the end of October. I asked Bill Yowell because we went back together after I broke up with Ron Troncatty. You met Bill a couple of years ago on Christmas Eve. And before I asked Bill, I had asked Ron because I was confused about how I felt about Bill. And then Susan and I went to a football game at Los Gatos High School and I officially met her brother, and I asked him

too. It was a big mess and I had to tell Bill and Ron that I wasn't taking them. They were both really pissed at me and what made it worse is that Ron is a good friend of Harrett's. It was crazy, and I am just glad it's all over with."

"So did you have a nice time at the dance?" Daddy asked condescendingly, shaking his head back and forth, like he had just heard more than he cared to.

"Yes. Susan took her boyfriend, and Karen took her boyfriend, and we all went on a triple date. I've been seeing Harrett ever since."

"So his family must have money since they are buying their kids new cars huh?" He asked.

"I think so. Harrett's dad is an attorney and they live in a really nice house in Willow Glen."

"Humph," was all he said.

"That's not the reason I like him, Daddy."

He sat slumped in his seat now sucking air through his teeth. Harrett had taken me to see Steve McQueen in *The Thomas Crown Affair* and I couldn't believe the similarities in Daddy's facial expressions and Steve McQueen's. They both had a way of looking sheepish and innocent around women, and they both sucked air through their front teeth the exact same way. Daddy was thinking now about what to say next and he blurted out, "Did I hear that you got fired from an ice cream store?"

“Oh brother,” I said. “For being completely uninvolved in my life for the last year and half, you sure know a whole bunch of stuff.”

When we got to Race Street Fish Market, he handed me three hundred dollars. “Give this to Mummy,” and then he gave me two twenties. “And this is for you.” Forty dollars was three months’ worth of gas at three dollars a week in my VW, or a really cute dress at Joseph Magnin. I chose the later of course. Gas money would come with the money from my job.

“Thanks, Daddy,” I said.

“I want you and your brother to come to LA when school’s out. You can stay with Auntie Ona and Uncle Don. I will take you all out to Santa Anita for the whole day,” he said. “I know you like that track better than Bay Meadows or Golden Gate Fields.”

I had a love-hate relationship with racetracks. Racetracks were part of the problem. They were the reason we had to do without, and while I loved a day at the track, I also resented them for what they did to families. Santa Anita Racetrack is three miles from where my aunt and uncle live in Pasadena, and it is connected to a popular shopping mall, so you can either gamble your money away betting on the ponies or you can shop it away in some really nice stores, or both. Either way, you are broke at the end of the day.

We had only been to Santa Anita a couple of times but I fell in love with this place the very first time in the early morning hours. The infield is flooded

with magnificent spring, summer, and then fall flowers, depending on the time of year. The aroma of coffee stings the cool morning air. The old buildings, constructed in the early thirties, made me feel like I was at Grandma's house in Willow Glen or camping at Mission Springs in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

If Grandma only knew what her oldest son had already exposed her grandchildren to. She would first say her favorite word—uff da! A Norwegian slang having several different meanings: I am so disappointed (in this case). Or it could mean: Oh shit! How terrible! That really stinks! It's an expression that Norwegians use to react to anything awful, disappointing, or to express sadness. Grandma had little tolerance for her bad boy sons, and as I got older and understood that I couldn't do anything about their behaviors, I learned to not be a tattletale and make a bad situation worse.

Grandma didn't believe in gambling or dancing, but she had no problem asking Grandpa to take the scenic route back to California through the Sierras to Lake Tahoe, on our way back from North Dakota. I was barely six years old when Grandma and Grandpa and Uncle Martin left me in the station wagon in front of a casino while they went in to gamble. I could see Grandma through the window, holding her paper cup full of nickels as she placed each nickel in the slot machine with the hope that this would be the time that she would pull the arm and make her fortune. Grandma would never admit it in a million years, but the gambling fever had struck her too.

When Daddy took us to Santa Anita, I wanted to forget Grandma's rules and Daddy's bad gambling habits and cozy myself into a box seat and watch the jockeys run their horses. Daddy knew the guy that led the horses into the starting gates, so we got to sit at his table, protected from the smoldering southern sun by the shadows of the stands. We had coffee and sweet rolls in the early morning while we watched the horses train and listened to Louis Armstrong sing *Two by Two* and *Butter and Egg Man* (two of my favorite racetrack songs). It was kind of funny when I thought about it. Daddy and Cliff had one thing, and only one thing, in common; they loved the same type of music and they shared their love for music with their kids.

Daddy's "line of work" meant that he had to work long hours. He may not go to bed until two or three in the morning, but he would be back up by six to be at the track or the sports book by eight to do his calculating on the racing form. Sometimes he would take a nap in the afternoon, but it was hard for him to sleep during the day and, besides, he said that he would miss his daytime game shows if he snoozed. He seemed to thrive on only a few hours of sleep. To me, it would seem much easier just to get a job working from nine to five, and it would be a lot less dangerous.

I knew that he loved his lifestyle or why else would he do it, but the regret was starting to show in his eyes, especially when he asked about Mom. He couldn't just pop in anymore now that Cliff was in the picture. Mom couldn't live the kind of life that Daddy had carved out for himself. But with Daddy it was

different. He wanted to keep one foot in our world and the other foot in his world. He loved the glamour of being in gambling houses every night—the noise, the women, and the fame of the big shot pit bosses knowing his name. I think he would have preferred it if he could find a way to keep his family together and, at the same time, be a gambler, but when faced with making the choice, his dangerous third-world life won out every time.

"So what else is going on?" he asked. "How do you like your job and your new house? And I heard you guys are going to a new school. Did I hear that you got fired? Or maybe I am thinking about someone else."

During the summer that I turned sixteen, we moved to a nicer house off of Winchester Boulevard on the other side of Highway 17, which meant placed us in the Campbell High School District, so technically Mickey and I were supposed to go to Campbell High School. Cliff said, "Just try it and see how you like it." At first I thought that going to a different high school might have its advantages. I could make friends at Campbell High and still have friends from Del Mar. Mickey was just starting his freshman year after going to Fisher Middle School in the eighth grade, so it wasn't as big of a deal for him as it was for me. So we did try it. We were there for three days, and I made up my mind that I was either going to quit school, or I was going to go back to Del Mar. I was not going to negotiate with Mom and Cliff. So I told Mickey my plan, and on the forth day of school, we took the catwalk over highway 17 to reenroll at Del Mar. I lied about our address,

and by some miracle the dean believed me. They let me reenter as a junior and let Mickey in as a freshman. Now all we needed to do was to make sure the school didn't find out. Mom had sent me with two signed notes: one for Mickey and one for me. The notes said, "To whom it may concern, Please excuse Mickey's absence on <date> as he is ill." I tossed her notes in the garbage and rewrote both notes in my own handwriting before we got to school so that if we ever cut school, I could write the excuse and the handwriting would be exactly the same.

I felt a new appreciation for being in school after getting back to Del Mar. And while Mickey and I were not "A" students, we were willing to try harder just to be in familiar surroundings with familiar friends. The saying, 'better the devil you know than the devil you don't' seemed to fit here. We had both felt the sting of having to make new friends. When I received Miss Williams's (Dean of Girls) approval to reenter school, I was ready to kiss her right on her lips and agree to any of her rules. I had promised myself that I would never make problems for that poor woman again—ever. My skirts would be at the right length, and I would no longer be late for class. Mickey didn't have the reputation to live down that I did. He was starting out with a clean slate. Unfortunately, these promises that I had made to myself were short lived and washed away with the excitement of my junior year. By the Christmas break, I had already been tardy more than thirty times and had to attend a meeting with all of the other students who had difficulty finding their way to class on time. So after Christmas, Mickey and I got serious

about buying a car that would help to get us to school, not only faster, but also early. Cliff promised to keep his eyes open for us at the dealership where he was a service manager. We each had $150.00 that we had saved from our new jobs. And that was how our little Volkswagen Beetle was born.

I had gotten a job at Wood's Ice Cream on San Carlos Street in November. Mickey got a job working at The Cardiff Affair Apartments on Union Avenue in Campbell, where Mom worked as a bookkeeper. Mickey painted apartments, dealt with plumbing problems, and also did some electrical work after school. With the Cardiff only being a few miles from Del Mar, Mickey could ride his bike to work after school, but I was dependent on my friends or Mom and Cliff to take me and pick me up from work. It always amazed me at how hard Mickey could work when money was involved.

Mr. and Mrs. Wood made fresh homemade ice cream everyday in the back room of their little store. They were an older couple and had gotten quite mean in their old age. They watched every move the ice cream scoopers made. We had to weigh each cone before we gave it to the customer. They even had a scale for sugar cones with their pointy bottoms. If we put too much ice cream on the cone, we had to redo it until we had under weighed or gotten the weight just right. One day when a police officer came in and ordered a double scoop, I accidently gave him too much ice cream, and I didn't feel comfortable putting it back and then rescooping it, so I gave it to him overweight. Mr. Wood saw what I had done and told me that if he ever saw me do that again, he would fire me.

They were miserable, old, ugly, fat people, and I hated working for them. They never had a nice word to say to or about anyone. The only thing that kept people coming back to their store was their creamy, delicious ice cream. On rare occasions, they would tell us to help ourselves to a sundae or a scoop on a cone. I loved their toasted almond ice cream covered with hot fudge, lots of whipped cream, with nuts and a cherry on top.

Unfortunately, only a few months after I started working for them, Mr. and Mrs. Wood had finally had enough of me and they fired me. It was on Easter Sunday. With the exception of having Good Friday off, watching my friends take off for Santa Cruz during Easter week while I had to stay home and work was torture for me. On Good Friday, Harrett's best friend, Brian Hathaway (Susan's boyfriend), called to tell me that he was going to the Mannina's beach house for the night, and he asked me if I wanted a ride over the hill. He assured me that he would be coming back the next day and that I would be on time for work in the afternoon, so off we went in his four-door 1937 Oldsmobile that we had respectfully named The Green Bean. The Green Bean had cloth seats, which had successfully absorbed the odors of each and every person who had ever ridden in it for the last thirty years. A dusty, musty stench penetrated my nostrils whenever I opened the gigantic door of this antique, but it ran okay, and we made it safely to our destination—Rio Del Mar Beach in Aptos.

The Manninas had a house right on the beach that somehow accommodated all of us with a bunkroom and two bedrooms upstairs and

another bunkroom downstairs. Mrs. Mannina said right off the bat that I would sleep with her whenever I stayed there, my guess is to make sure that Harrett and I wouldn't be tempted. Harrett's dad wasn't due to arrive until Easter Sunday and by then we would all be long gone. Mrs. Mannina liked having us all in one place, so she could keep an eye on us. She had even hosted a New Year's Eve party for all of us and called our parents to let them know that we would be staying the night.

So on Saturday afternoon, when Brian and I were supposed to leave, he begged and pleaded for me to call my bosses and tell them that I was sick. He wanted to stay one more night. I called Mr. Wood and made up some phony story about my boyfriend getting in a car accident, which they of course didn't believe, and when I showed up for work on Easter Sunday at 1:00 (a whole day late), Mr. and Mrs. Wood pulled up behind my VW. Mr. Wood quickly went to my car window and with the reddest angriest face I had ever seen on any human being, he told me not to bother getting out of my car because I was fired and that he would mail me my last check. I don't remember a time in my life that I felt more hurt and embarrassed. I cried all the way home and then continued to cry for the rest of Easter Sunday.

Mom came home and after the initial feeling sorry for me was over, she asked me just what had I expected to happen. "Did you really think you were going to get away with that?" she asked. I would have answered her but I was crying so hard that I couldn't. Later I told her that I really needed a job doing

something, because I needed to buy out Mickey's half of the Volkswagen so that he could buy a motorcycle when he turned sixteen.

A week went by and Mom told me that there was a job opening in the kitchen at the Cardiff Swim and Racket Club where she and Mickey worked. I applied for it and the chef, an older woman named Pat Trovato, gave me the job. Pat was from New Jersey where she had been an English teacher. She had left her abusive husband and three daughters and had come out to California a few years earlier to become a chef. And just short of having warts on her nose, she was truly the most unattractive woman I had ever seen in my life. Her specialty was Pennsylvania Dutch cuisine and everybody adored her—except me. Pat wasn't the easiest person to work for. She did not answer questions at all, even if they were important questions. The other assistants and I (all high school students) learned to think and make split second decisions. If we did something wrong, Pat berated us, which was her way of teaching us. By the time I graduated from high school I was ready to move on to something other than chop, cook, and wash dishes. I had not only learned a lot about cooking from watching Pat, I had also learned never to waste time by walking around empty handed, and never ever to put things away that you might use again. This, as one would imagine, drove my mother nuts. The best part was that I had become a really good cook.

I worked every other day and always on Sunday, meaning that going to church could not happen as long as I had this job. One week, I worked Tuesday,

Thursday, and Saturday from four to eleven o'clock and the next week I worked Wednesday and Friday from four to eleven o'clock. Never on Monday (because they were closed) and always on Sunday from nine o'clock in the morning until four or five o'clock in the afternoon. On Sundays, brunch was served from eleven to two o'clock. This schedule kept me busy, to say the least, but the stress of getting my homework completed and going to work everyday without getting fired (again) seemed better for me. It was the first time in my life that I had fewer hours with three times as much to do, and I somehow found time for everything, including the social life that I had grown so accustomed to.

Less than a month after I dropped Daddy off at the airport, he called to tell me that he was moving back home. I wondered what home meant to him. If home was actually San Jose that meant that home was where we were. For me, home meant San Jose. It meant the place I was born. It meant the place I have always gone to school. It meant the place I would get married and have children someday. And I didn't know it at the time, but I had already met my future husband, born and raised in San Jose, and the man I would one day have my only child with. San Jose meant the place I would die. But for Daddy, home could mean so many places: born in North Dakota, lived in Everett, Washington, for a while, from there moved to Pasadena, California, where the Wagles got much closer to where they would finally settle in San Jose.

No matter where Grandma was, she had a way of making home seem so homey as she bustled around the house doing laundry and hanging clothes on the line out in the backyard. Grandma made everybody's beds. She wasn't the nagging type. She just did stuff. Coffee every morning. Breakfast, coffee, lunch, coffee, afternoon snack, coffee, dinner, coffee, dessert and then coffee at the end of the day. These were constants at home with Grandma, and I could not figure out why Daddy would stray so far away from home. He said it was because Grandma spanked him so much when he was little. I had never heard that from Auntie Ona, Uncle David, or Uncle John. They never complained that Grandma spanked them at all—just Daddy.

"Home, Daddy?" I asked. "Home where?"

"I found a nice apartment in Sunnyvale over on Lawrence Expressway. It's called the Lake Terrace Apartments," he said. "Our apartment backs up to a small lake with ducks that swim around."

"*Our* apartment?" I asked.

"Yea, I live with somebody. Her name is Diane and I want you to meet her."

I felt like I had been slapped so hard across the face that what was left of my cheek now hung over my neck. My forehead ached, and my eyes burned as if someone had poured dish soap in them to torture me, and that lump, that lump in my throat. It came back. I couldn't speak. He was supposed to come back to *us* when he got his life together, not start a new life with somebody else. Daddy

and I had gone from my childhood where we barely spoke, almost instantly to my late teens where he had given himself permission to say anything he wanted. I didn't like it. I liked it better when there was silence, when he did magic tricks for us in place of talking, or when we did talk, he asked mindless questions about school and our friends. Now he had told me more than I wanted to know. He had a girlfriend, and she lived with him. He wasn't pining away for our mother, waiting for her to change her mind about him and his gambling.

I wanted him to come back now and be the one to doctor up my thumb when I cut the end of it off at work with the meat slicer. I had appreciated it when Cliff came right over to the swim and racket club with his medicine kit and all of his clever bandages, especially the butterfly bandage that he finally used and then took me home. But I wanted it to be Daddy and now he had taken up with some woman. Maybe she was the woman who owned all of those clothes we received when they had to flee their apartment in the middle of the night, probably being chased by the cops. I always thought of this woman as some temporary person who worked in a nightclub—a waitress or a blackjack dealer. I didn't think that he would bring her to where we live and give her a home, especially when he didn't even provide a home for us. But then I didn't know for sure.

I hung up the phone quietly without saying goodbye. When it rang again, I didn't pick it up. No one was home except for me, so I just let it ring. How would I be able to tell my mother that Daddy was bringing his girlfriend home to live?

Would this woman be visiting Grandma and Grandpa? I wondered. *Would she take my mother's place now on my dad's side of the family?* The thought gave me chills. I wanted to run away from it so it wouldn't happen. If I didn't talk about it, or think about it, it wouldn't hurt.

So Mickey and I wouldn't be going to Los Angeles after school let out, and the Santa Anita Racetrack would have to wait. I hadn't told Mickey and Mom about Daddy's invite, and now it was just as well. Mickey and I had more important things to do than to hang out with the likes of Daddy anyway.

Chapter VIII

High School History

The problem with my junior year was history. I hated it. It made no sense to study it, and I could not understand how any of us in our required U.S. Government class could benefit from living in the past. Mom and I, with Cliff (the self-appointed expert on everything), at the helm, kept this argument going for a good part of the year when one day my U.S. Government teacher (probably frustrated with his own inability to get us involved with this subject and getting us to pay attention to something other than doodling and writing notes to each other) started talking about how ugly Bascom Avenue is. I felt as if I had been dropped on my head. He was right. Bascom Avenue was in fact ugly, but what did that have to do with anything. And what made it worse was that after not paying attention, I couldn't exactly come out and ask him because then he would know for sure that I had not been listening to a word he had been saying. So I sat quietly and began to listen attentively while he went into detail about Bascom Avenue from where it begins in Santa Clara, through San Jose, Campbell, and then to its final destination in Los Gatos. Del Mar High runs parallel to, and one block away from Bascom Avenue so the class was familiar with this main thoroughfare.

At the time, Fred Sahadi was in the process of breaking ground to build The Pruneyard Shopping Center and Towers building on the corner of Bascom and Campbell Avenues, which would certainly, when completed, improve the

look of the Campbell area. And we were all excited to have a shopping center closer than Valley Fair. My mother had worked for Mr. Sahadi since I was about twelve so she would tell us about the shops and restaurants that would be opening when it was finished. Patrick James, Con Liquori, El Burro, Trudy's, Pool, Patio, and Things, The Pruneyard Theater, The Cook Book, and The Bank of America, were just a few of the places we would now have close by. But I was a bit puzzled as to where said U.S. Government teacher was going with this (my mind still wandering in and out of consciousness) until he finally got to the point, which was much simpler than I had originally supposed.

The Pruneyard had actually been a prune orchard (I knew that) before Mr. Sahadi later built his magnificently beautiful Spanish style shopping center, with its cobblestone paths, tile roofs, and the railroad ties that were used to stabilize the buildings both vertically and horizontally. This was not only a project to make money for the Sahadis, it also played a role in putting Campbell, a tiny little suburb of San Jose, on the map and was the first step in changing Bascom Avenue's appearance for the better.

My question was, why was this piece of information important to the history we were supposed to be studying? And, without having to ask the question myself, said U.S. Government teacher's response was that if no one had recorded the *history* of this piece of property on the corner of Campbell and Bascom Avenues, we wouldn't have a clue as to what to name the shopping center, in turn paying its due respect to it once being a prune orchard, or even

how to design the shopping center. *What? You mean I sat here and paid attention for that?* I thought.

Now, while I still don't see that a name for a shopping center is important, my views on why we study history have changed considerably since this class. I did start paying more attention after the twenty minutes it took for this teacher to talk about something that was actually relevant to our current lives.

If you were lucky enough to have parents and grandparents that loved to tell stories about their own lives, their parents, and their grandparents, you had the benefit of your own history. Of course, while many of us listened to these stories and we laughed, we cried, or we were just plain bored, I can't honestly say that we learned much from their cautionary tales because this stuff was strictly entertainment for us, and not to be taken seriously. We may as well have been watching *Zorro* or *I Love Lucy* reruns. Their stories just didn't apply to us, because we were too busy with our modern-day lives to put much merit on "the olden days."

Our priorities, as teenagers, had to do mainly with acquiring a driver's license and then finding a part time job so we could buy a car and to drive to work so we could pay for the car. The vicious circles of life were just beginning for us. Making sure that we had a date for Friday night was way more important than being saddled with something that had happened a zillion years ago when *their* only transportation had to do with attaching a carriage to a horse.

But these were the years that we formed our values and opinions, and my U.S. Government teacher was doing his best. With only one more year of high school left he tried his best to reel us in and show us how important knowing how generations before us solved the problems that we most likely would face in our lifetime. Too bad he didn't have a crystal ball so he could predict the future to save us from all of the life-altering mistakes we would soon make.

One night during my trying-to-see-the-value-of-history period, I came home from a date with Ron Troncatty. We had gone to see the movie *The Battle of the Bulge* at Century 21, our new dome theater in San Jose on Winchester Boulevard. When Century 21 opened, the movies that were shown there lasted for, at the very least, six months and you had to buy your numbered seats in advance. When Ron and I came back to my mom's house after the movie, we were arguing over whether the *Battle of the Bulge* was a true story or not. Ron told me that the battle never happened and that the film industry made the whole thing up. I was in shock that someone could be so stupid not to know that it was a real battle. And it was not because I was a big history buff, because I wasn't. I actually hated history and could not see the value in it so when a person like me even knew that the battle really happened, I thought that Ron must be really dumb. Ron had been on my last nerve these days anyway. I picked fights with him for the tiniest reasons. He had become too clingy and needy and I didn't like it, so rather than stay out late, I told him that I was tired and had him bring me

home early. Mom and Cliff were sitting quietly on the sofa sipping their martinis and munching on their hors d'oeuvres.

Cliff, a veteran of WWII, knowing that I was going to see this movie, had briefed me earlier in the week on the history of the battle. Mom and Cliff listened proudly as I regurgitated everything that I had learned from Cliff. It wasn't long after that that I broke up with Ron.

Sometime during my junior year, Mom became my cheerleader. I felt like I had my very own president of my very own fan club. She made me feel like she was genuinely proud of me, which is not to say that she wasn't tough on me. I was the oldest and there were high expectations for the oldest child, and while Mom had high expectations for Mickey, Mickey was a boy growing up in a man's world. We knew from being more familiar with our father's backside that Mickey would probably follow in his footsteps. Mickey could get away with things that I never could, especially after what he went through while he lived with Uncle Dave and Aunt Pam. When Mom knew that Mickey was about to go somewhere, she would remind him of something she had asked him to do, and Mickey would yell from the front door, "Okay, Mom," as he was opening the door and walking out and away from all responsibility. And Cindy, being the baby, was the only person I knew who could load a dishwasher, run it through its cycle, and all of the dishes would come out dirty. Mom and I learned right away that it was much easier to just do it ourselves rather than expect Cindy to do anything.

It was Daddy's attitude toward women that Mickey had picked up on. Daddy believed in that old saying that "Women should be barefoot and pregnant." I just couldn't figure out whom he thought might be footing the bill for this barefoot, pregnant woman he idealized. Certainly not him. Men had it easy and they made more money than women doing the same job. I liked seeing Mom start to exercise her rights now and be more assertive. She seemed to have more rights as a woman now that she worked for Mr. Sahadi. He trusted her judgment and he respected her work ethic and, most of all, he paid her a fair salary. But many women during this time had to accept the fact that they could legally be discriminated against because they were not men. And while my grandmother's generation was happy with a high school education (my mother's mother had only finished the fourth grade and my dad's mother had only graduated from high school), the women of my mother's generation were fed up with being treated like second-class citizens and they were beginning to fight back.

Thanks to the dedicated work of Alice Paul, Coretta Scott King, Martha W. Griffiths, and many others, including those who came before, like Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucretia Mott, women not only had the right to vote, they were also supposed to receive the same pay as men doing the same job along with not being afraid of being discriminated against or sexually harassed. My U. S. Government teacher did not teach us women's history in 1967. Our history books had little information about women's contributions. But

women were starting to spend a lot more time in bookstores these days so we were exposed to the propaganda that was being circulated on their injustices.

Most of my friends' mothers didn't work. They stayed home and took care of their families. It was always strange for me to go to a girlfriend's house and her mom was either home or on her way home from the grocery store, having lunch out, or having her hair done. No dirty dishes in their sinks. Beds were made. No dirty laundry. Bathrooms were clean. Yard work was done.

My friend Susan's mom, who was also the mother of my new boyfriend, knew that I bought lunch off campus at McDonald's on Bascom Avenue, or ate a Twinkie and drank a coke on campus. Not what I would call nourishing to sustain me through a busy school and work schedule. So Mrs. Mannina started sending a sandwich with Susan everyday for me to eat instead of the Twinkies I had been eating and Coke I had been drinking. She made tuna, liverwurst, steak, or Goober's peanut butter and jelly. I never turned them down and will be forever grateful that Mom Mannina always looked out for me. But, not only did Mrs. Mannina stay home, she also had a cleaning crew come in to clean her house from top to bottom twice a month. She had enough to do just managing her household, as well as their beach house in Aptos, the laundry, and dropping off Mr. Mannina's shirts and all of the sheets to be professionally cleaned and pressed without having to do housework.

Of all her duties, Mrs. Mannina enjoyed cooking the most. She usually started dinner in the morning by concocting some type of a vegetable casserole

or a quiche. Just before dinner, she tossed crisp green romaine lettuce, perfectly seasoned and dressed, often times a Caesar Salad, in a large monkey pod bowl they had bought in Hawaii. When Mr. Mannina came home, he would put some type of meat—steak or pork chops—on the outdoor grill. Or, Mrs. Mannina would bread and gently fry the venison that Mr. Mannina and his dad shot over the previous summer. They also ate everything on separate plates. The first time I ate at their house, Mom Mannina served chili beans in champagne glasses. Each item she served had its own space uncontaminated by touching any of the other foods.

But no matter what women did or did not do, they still somehow lost their identifies after they got married and, even more so, after their children were born. When I started working in the kitchen at the swim and racket club, even though my mother had worked for Mr. Sahadi's organization much longer than I had, people began to know my mother as *my* mother. She was no longer Anita, Mr. Sahadi's bookkeeper. Mom was the mother of the person who paraded around in the tiniest bikini bathing suits, hot pants, mini skirts, and occasionally granny dresses. My mother would often hear, "Oh you're Annie's mom," or "Aren't you Annie's mom?" Fortunately, this always tickled my mother. Women were wives to their husbands, ex wives to their ex husbands (few women were divorced in my world), daughters to their dads, sisters to their brothers, mothers to their children, and so on.

This was the year, still only a junior in high school that I learned the most about myself by watching the women closest to me, and I often wondered which one of them I would most be like when I grew up. Would I get married right after I graduated from high school, like my mother, my aunts, and most of their friends, or would I go to college first? (I knew that I wasn't taking classes that would get me into a state college, so I would have to go to West Valley Junior College first, not to mention that I didn't have the money for a state college). Would I have children early or would I wait awhile after I got married, or not have children at all? Or would I not get married at all? *Maybe no one will want to marry me*, I thought.

Most of these women had grown up in households where there were two parents, some had gone to college, gotten married, and had their children when they were young. They had traded their mother's housedresses and aprons for short shorts and pants suits. They smoked cigarettes and they drank alcohol (even when they were pregnant and bragged about it later) and they went to bars with their girlfriends. And they often times married their first sex partner, unlike our generation who wanted to shop around first, who said they would live together before marriage just to make sure they had chosen wisely.

Our generation (the Hippies) will someday act as if they invented natural childbirth. They will take pride in having their babies in birthing rooms without the use of drugs and episiotomies. The children will be breastfed, and never eat food from a jar or a can. Our generation will grow organic gardens and make

their own baby food. They will read books on parenting, rejecting the ways of Dr. Spock. They will be the naturalists, the nurturers, the non-spankers, the listeners, and the negotiators-without-yelling generation. They will give their children time outs for bad behavior and focus on the positive rather than the negative. They will say things like “good job” and clap for the tiniest successes they see in their children. Moms will stay home to raise their children, postponing or sacrificing their educations, careers, and finances. That will all come later after the kids go off to college. Their children will have high self-esteems as a result. And they will not smoke (ever), or drink during their pregnancies. They will show their girls how to survive in a man’s world and show their boys how to be sensitive to the needs of women. They will raise children who are not afraid of them. The children coming from this generation will be able to tell their parents anything. They will love their children unconditionally—gay or straight. They will teach their children that they have no limits. That they can do anything they make up their minds to do no matter what gender they are. And they will teach them fairness and kindness and how never to discriminate against people who are not like them. They will make it sound so easy.

The women from my mother’s generation and from her mother’s generation had survived World War II, a time when many women had to raise their children by themselves because their husbands were away at war. Some had taken on the title Rosie the Riveter, working outside of the home, doing work that men were unable to do because they were in Europe. And while many of

these women were fortunate enough to return to their domestic duties after the war, changes had occurred for them that could never be erased. Many women were confused by what they were feeling. They mistakenly thought that they wanted things to go back the way they were. They missed the stability that their husbands provided, and they welcomed returning home after the war ended. But when they did return home, they often times found themselves unsatisfied by just being housewives.

Kitchen appliances like dishwashers and automatic washing machines and dryers filled the markets. The Fuller Brush man came by regularly to make sure that the "little lady" had everything she needed in the way of dust mops and brooms. The Kirby Vacuum Cleaner salesman also went from door to door to ensure that every woman in America was equipped with a vacuum cleaner that was guaranteed to destroy your carpet's fibers by its powerful suction in less than a year.

Some say that what happened to women during the aftermath of WWII was solely responsible for the Woman's Movement of the 1960s, but my U.S. Government teacher was not teaching this in our history classes, or if he was, we weren't listening.

Our generation of women believed like all generations before it. We believed that we could do a better job than the last. We looked at our mothers and said, "I will never be like my mother." And then one day we woke from a deep sleep and stretched out our arms and hands and repeated something we

had heard from our mothers over and over again. We said things like “God gave me two hands and two legs, and I’m doin’ the best I can with the tools God gave me,” and “you can’t squeeze blood out of a turnip,” and yes, “this is my house and my roof and as long as you are living under my roof, you will live by my rules.” Over night, we would sound identical to our mothers—same voice, same facial expressions, same convictions to stand our ground. If each generation had spoken to the next, they must have drowned out the sound with their own idealistic voices, possibly for fear of making the same mistakes. But somehow without knowing our own histories, without the knowledge of mistakes made, we somehow find our own way. We somehow survive. It will be different for us, we say.

The hippie generation, best known for loose sex, bra burning, marijuana smoking, acid taking, sit-in demonstrating, and war protesting still maintained peace and love and hope for the next generation who would be raised to reap the benefits of our tenacious labors, just like the last one and the one before that. Bob Dylan’s song, *The Times They are a Changin*, said it best.

These were the histories of the people, particularly the women, who came before my junior year of high school. And as I began to learn more about them—their sacrifices and their struggles—I began to develop an appreciation for why we study history—not the remembering dates part (because my brain just plain doesn’t process dates unless it’s my birthday) but definitely the story part. The truth was that I didn’t know where my mother fit into all of this. She never wanted

to work outside of the home. She wanted to stay home and raise her children. She loved housework. She loved ironing, and she was a great cook. It was my father who forced her into working with his absence and lack of caring. He made it impossible for her to stay home and be a good wife and mother. If it had been up to my mother, the sheets and pillowcases would be ironed, along with our underwear and bras. We would go off to school every morning with a hot delicious meal in our bellies and come home to snacks in the afternoon and not have to start dinner. And on Saturday mornings, when the rest of the neighborhood was playing in the street, we would be out there playing with them, not having to do housework for part of the day.

But out of necessity came invention said Plato, so if we didn't have to live like this, Mickey, Cindy and I wouldn't have been sitting on face towels on the kitchen floor shining it up with the action of our butts going in a circular motion, laughing until our sides hurt. Mom washed the kitchen floor every week, but every so often, like once a month, she stripped off the old wax and put a fresh coat of wax on the floor. When the wax dried, it left a film on the floor that the three of us buffed out to a glossy shine.

My point is that often times women like my mother had to make do, whether it was to find a clever way of bringing the shine out of a dull kitchen floor or to save the dampened clothes from mildewing by sticking them into the freezer. Women who raised children without the help of a man were given the opportunity to be great inventors, and if my mother had married Ed Pasquale

instead of Dan Wagle, she would have had a much easier life, but think of all she would have missed out on.

Mom and I became more like buddies now that I was driving, had a job, and looked like I would graduate from high school. I had successfully developed a consistent pattern of juggling all of the balls that I had thrown up in the air. Mom called it “biting off more than I could chew.” And even though I had been her wife since I was about seven, I never once lost sight of the fact that she was the alpha wolf in our relationship.

We wore the same size clothes, and we could share most of the things in our wardrobe, making clothes shopping much cheaper. Mom looked and dressed young (still getting carded at thirty-four), my boyfriends shamelessly flirted with her when I brought them home. But something that put a damper on our relationship was that she was angry with Daddy all the time. It was obvious that she had been storing up this anger for quite some time, but now she was letting it all hang out. Where she once had a rule of *not* talking badly about Daddy, she now was spitting out expletives all beginning with “your father” this and “your father” that. And it became obvious that Cliff was fueling her fire since he was the reasonably new person in our lives. Cliff had even gone anonymously to court with Mom to watch my dad first hand. Cliff had never failed to support his family, nor had he ever abandoned them, and he could not

understand how a man could do this and not feel guilty about it. What I didn't understand was that I was beginning to feel that my dad's behavior was my fault.

I was at a point in my life where I could see that I was looking back on all of the what-ifs. What if I had studied harder and my grades were good enough to get into college? What if I had gone to live with my dad in Los Angeles? Where would I be if I hadn't broken up with Raymond? What if I had stayed with Bill? What if I had stayed with Ron? Is there anyone else out there who might be a better choice than Harrett? Am I wasting my time? Am I just Harrett's main screw? If I stay with him, will he marry me after he graduates from college? *Do I even want to marry him?* I wondered. He does have a nice family. His sister is one of my closest friends. But then, I came to the big question: What will they think of me when they find out about my dad? Will they care? Anytime a parent asked me about my father, I lied to them, and said that my dad lives in Los Angeles and he has a painting and wallpaper hanging business there. *But when I get married, all of this will have to come out at some point*, I thought.

My mother was a bookkeeper and worked for The Cardiff Affair Apartments in Campbell. Everyone knew The Cardiff. Most of the people who lived there were young and single or middle-aged and divorced. Few were married. And everyone was waiting for the owner of The Cardiff to complete the new shopping center in Campbell. My mother wasn't doing anything I was ashamed of. In fact, she became a sort of celebrity. When I told people about my mother, I was proud of where she worked and what she did. *It's all about a*

person's history, I thought. *It's all about the choices they make, and how they use their history to serve their best interests.*

My U.S. Government teacher told us several times during my junior year that we are making our own histories right now. Right this very moment. Those things we do, and don't do, will determine the everyday outcomes of our lives, from picking out the name of our brand new shopping center, to naming our first child, to the most important thing we will ever do, and that is, to choosing a spouse. I didn't see it. When we are independent, have independent thought, have independent rules, what difference does it make whom we marry? How could the person we marry affect us in any way?

It wasn't long after this lecture when I kept hearing the phrase, Summer of Love. Summer of Love? *What the heck is the Summer of Love?* I wondered.

I had been to The Haight-Ashbury district in San Francisco with my mother and Dixie Fender, a woman from South Carolina who briefly moved in with us and rented Mickey's room when he went to live with Uncle Dave and Aunt Pam. The three of us had gotten all dressed up and strolled by clubs and shops where unfamiliar sweet scents permeated the night air, and the strangest looking people I had ever seen, who wore sole less knee-high leather boots and faded raggedy dark clothing, prowled the neighborhood along side of us, taking quick glances at us as if we had just landed on earth from someplace else. As hard as we tried to look like we belonged there, we stuck out like three redwood trees in a fern garden. The music, blaring from the clubs, was different from what we bought

and listened to on the radio. The Beatles, The Dave Clark Five, Elvis Presley, The Rolling Stones, and The Beach Boys monopolized our radio stations. There wasn't anything chipper or uplifting about the music in The Haight. It was all guitar music, and there were few words. It reminded me of the instrumental albums my dad often played when he used to come home that he called "The Blues." This music was slower and whiney. The guitars went off on high notes and lingered. The singers had raspy slow voices.

But one day when I realized that the Summer of Love had somehow gotten by me unnoticed because I had worked all summer, I decided that I needed to get back into having fun again. I didn't know how I was going to do that because I needed the dollar and a half an hour I was earning to pay for my clothes, and there was only so much time in a day. No matter how smart I thought I was, I couldn't give myself more hours.

I only saw Harrett once a week, either on Friday or Saturday night depending on what night I had to work, which wasn't the reason for the once-a-week dates. He wanted to go out with his friends the rest of the week and was only willing to give me that one night. And for some unknown reason, I stayed somewhat loyal to this person. Maybe I liked being mistreated. Maybe I was used to being last on his list because I was always last on my dad's list and it felt comfortable to me so I put up with it. Maybe I knew that Harrett would be the one I would marry some day.

I didn't go to the Senior Ball that year. Harrett was a freshman at West Valley College so I took him to my Junior Prom. He still had a lot of friends at Del Mar and some of his friends were going to the prom with my girlfriends so he was willing to make the sacrifice and take me. I had never been to a Junior Prom, and I can't say that it was much fun when I compared it to the two Senior Balls I had been to. It was over by eleven o'clock, so we changed our clothes and went to Triple X on Bascom Avenue to get something to eat.

The music we listened to was a lot like the music I had heard the night Mom and Dixie and I wandered through The Haight. We listened to KSJO or KAML, two local radio stations that played the cool music, not the bebop that KYA or KLIV played. Yes, Bob Dylan, the times they are a changin.

The words to much of the music we listened to protested the Vietnam War. Mom and Cliff referred to it as "hippie" music and yelled for me to shut it off or turn it down. Joan Baez and her husband David, who had run off to Canada as a draft dodger. Country Joe and the Fish. Arlo Guthrie. The Youngbloods. The Byrds. Buffalo Springfield. Neil Young. The Rolling Stones. John Lennon. Richie Havens. Steppenwolf. Pete Seger. Crosby, Stills, Nash, and (Neil) Young. Creedence Clearwater. The Yardbirds. Jefferson Airplane. Maryann Faithful. Just a few of the many composers who brought us the lyrics that demonstrated against war. This was the history we made. For $4.50 we could get a ticket to see any of these bands and more at the Fillmore West, at the intersection of Market Street and Van Ness Avenue in San Francisco, originally

known as The Carousel Ballroom, not to be confused with the Fillmore Auditorium, which was on Fillmore Street and Geary Boulevard. We made our way up the winding stairway to, what seemed to us, an enormous room with a stage at one end that was only a step high with ginormous speakers on each side.

Bill Graham walked amongst us as if we were his close friends. He kept the show going until four or five in the morning, giving us plenty of time to sober up enough to find our cars somewhere out there on the streets of San Francisco and then to make the drive home. Each time a new band was about to perform, Bill announced the band and casually walked off the stage into the crowd as if he were on his way to fix a toilet or to make us some French fries. He was scruffy and dark looking, usually dressed in jeans and a cotton tee shirt—a real workingman.

We brought blankets and pillows to spread out on the old hardwood floor that generations before us had danced on. We sat crossed legged, or when it got late, we sometimes fell asleep even with the loud music blaring through the room. A large white screen covered the back wall of the stage for the liquid light show that coagulated and gelatinized into beautiful soft continuously moving shapes. Sometimes these shapes were vibrantly colored with oranges and reds, and sometimes, cool blues and purples, depending on the sounds of the music. This light show had a way of dominating our moods.

Taking frequent trips to the Fillmore was part of my commitment to myself to have more fun while I was in high school. So whenever I didn't have to work I would find a group of girls and we would drive up to the city. I had developed a taste like my dad and Cliff for the blues, and I preferred bands like The Grateful Dead, Muddy Waters, B. B. King, Albert King, or John Lee Hooker. We also went to the Winterland Ballroom on the corner of Post and Steiner Streets. Jimi Hendrix, Jefferson Airplane, and Paul Butterfield were just a few of the bands my friends and I saw at Winterland.

The nights we spent at these clubs became our escapes from the realities we had to look forward to after we graduated from high school. The realities of the times were that some of my male friends would be drafted into the military and have to kill someone or be killed. My mom and Cliff will force my brother to enlist in the army after he graduates in 1971. Fortunately, he will enter military service at the tail end of the Vietnam War and spend his time shuttling back and forth from Fort Ord to Fort Hunter Liggett, working on helicopter engines, well out of harm's way. But those that I graduate with, in 1969, will either go to college or face the draft board.

If I could address my U. S. Government teacher today, this is what I would say:

Dear Mr. U.S. Government teacher,

We may have not been listening to your lectures, but we made history. We changed the world. We burned American flags and landed on the Moon. We

elected the youngest president in the history of the United States. We organized sit-ins, disrupting government offices and college campuses to demonstrate our hatred of war and the capitalistic pigs that manipulated us with greed and materialism. We mocked the conservatives from the 1950s. We questioned the government and all other authorities, including our parents and teachers. We dodged the draft and conscientiously objected to the war. We became sexually liberated, breaking the constraints placed on us by our parents and society. We demanded more rights for women and minorities. And we did it all in the name of peace and love.

Chapter IX

All In God's Hands

Grandma sat quietly on the Victorian sofa she and Grandpa had brought back from North Dakota two years ago. She is a big-boned woman but today she looks petite against the high sides and back of this oversized antique, her weight sinking into the gold brocade pillows that have deflated and become almost flat, no longer soft with decades of sitting and lying. Her shoulders slumped, hands folded one over the other on her lap, obviously she is in pain, but as always, Grandma doesn't want to make a fuss. Her skin has turned a yellowish grey since the last time I saw her only a few weeks ago. Her once bright blue eyes, now sallow, are drawn and more sunken in than they usually are. On any other day Grandma runs circles around everyone, but now she sits—waiting to go. As I look deep into her eyes searching for answers, a blaring voice inside my head tells me that our lives will never be the same after today.

"Jesus loves you, Miss Muffet," she chirps. She attempts her best fake smile, turning up the corners of her lips and then releasing them back down as if even that small gesture exhausts her.

"I know, Grandma," I say just to pacify her so she won't think that I have completely lost my faith. I know she wonders if I have lost my way and that she prays for me daily. I know that she looks for me in church and she doesn't understand why I'm not there. She doesn't understand having a job on a Sunday. She doesn't understand why businesses are even open on Sundays.

Sundays are family days, according to Grandma. But then again Grandma doesn't understand a lot of things about me right now. "Why do you always need to have a boyfriend?" she asks every time I see her. "Can't you at least take a break between them sweetheart?" I don't understand this about myself either. I can't seem to go slowly into the next relationship. I just dive right in before I have even closed the door on the last one.

Grandma and Grandpa had sold their house in Saratoga a few years ago so they could take a road trip up to Everett, Washington, to visit family and then drive through Wyoming and Montana en route to their final destination—Cooperstown, North Dakota, where they are both from and where I once visited with them as a child. They left soon after Mickey moved out of their house and back home with us. They were gone for several months and when they returned they found a little house to rent in downtown San Jose. When their money from the sale of the house was almost all gone, Grandpa had to start up the painting business again. The only work Grandma had ever done was seasonal in the canneries on Auzerais Avenue on the outskirts of Willow Glen, but that was a long time ago. She never did drive, and she was too old to work, so Grandpa, Uncle John, and Uncle Dave put the word out that Olaf Wagle, Painting and Paperhanging was back in business. When the business became more lucrative, they were able to move away from the downtown area and to the west side of San Jose. They found a small house for rent on Custer Drive off of Foxworthy—perfect for them

and their sons to come and go between marriages—the breakups never their fault, of course. But their house always had a fresh coat of paint on the walls—inside and out, and their cleanliness and orderliness seemed to make up for their three son's inability to be like other more responsible fathers.

I went to the kitchen to see if there was anything I could do. I could smell the burnt toast and strong coffee streaming into the living room. Grandpa sat at the kitchen table, elbow sticking straight out, fork in hand attacking a piece of white bread smeared thick with sour cream and sprinkled with sugar. The burnt toast discarded in the sink is soaking in water. Since Grandpa's doctor told him that sour cream and bread is good for his ulcer, I started eating this concoction at the same time when I was about four.

"Grandma wasn't hungry this morning, sweetheart," he said shrugging his shoulders and looking off in Grandma's direction confused.

"That's okay, Grandpa," I said opening the package of Wonder Bread preparing to join him. "She has enough fat on her to last her for a long time," I tried to make light of the somber mood enveloping the house. We didn't know it then, but it was just as well that she couldn't eat anyway considering that she would be in surgery most of the afternoon and evening. We both knew that something was terribly wrong. We just didn't know what.

After the surgery, later that night, Auntie Ona called me from the hospital and said that we could see Grandma briefly the next day. She would be in the

hospital for five more days, maybe longer, and her treatments would begin as soon as she was strong enough.

"Is Daddy with you?" I asked.

"Yes, he's in the room with Grandma," she said. "Grandma isn't awake yet, Annie. She doesn't know about the cancer. The doctor will tell her when she wakes up."

I started to cry. "I'll see you tomorrow then," I said quietly, as I hung up the phone.

Grandma and Grandpa held the family together with their faith and their crazy senses of humor. Grandpa was our storyteller, and Grandma would stand back by the kitchen sink, listening to him go on and on, and then she would start laughing and say, "Oh Dad, you exaggerate so. Uff da."

No matter where they lived, no matter what was going on in their lives, they somehow could make everything they did festive and fun. I often told them that visiting them was like going to the circus. They could always find something to laugh about. And then, of course, there was Yahtzee. But today Grandma was in a very deep sleep and no one was laughing or playing Yahtzee.

The unspoken question of how long she would live loomed over the tops of our conversations. The doctors only delivered the results of the surgery, how well she came through the surgery, her strength, and her stamina. We cared about those things but now we all wanted to zap ourselves into the future to know

the outcome, and then go back and have a do over to find out what caused the cancer and then be able to catch it earlier. The doctors kept saying, “If we could have caught it earlier . . . “ But what does that mean for her now that they didn’t catch it earlier? We wanted to know how long she had left, how much pain she would have to endure. None of the answers satisfied us. None of the answers gave us peace. We felt hollow, unable to console ourselves without Grandma. And we knew that we wouldn’t feel better until she could come home and make us her special coffee, and Norwegian pancakes, and laugh at her own silly jokes. Until she could stand up straight in her five-foot-eight frame, orchestrating dinner for as many people who showed up at any given time, her arms going in every direction like an octopus, we wouldn’t be content or happy with anything the doctors had to say. Grandma had been trying to self-medicate. She thought she had a bladder infection and had called Mom several times over the last few months picking up a few pills here and there that Mom had leftover from *her* bladder infections.

For the last seventeen years, I had been traipsing in and out of their house for one reason or another. Whether I was ill, or sick of living at home, or Mom and I had gotten into a fight, Grandma always had a hot meal and a place for me to sleep. And I never took them for granted or left their house without doing my share. I always jumped up first to do the dishes, only now I didn’t have to stand on a chair anymore like when I was five, and she first showed me the art of dish washing, the importance of using hot water, getting every tiny speck of

soap rinsed off so we didn't ingest it and then get diarrhea. Now that I was older, she would try to push me away from the sink as I stood firmly in front of it. "Don't tell me what to do Grandma," I chided. "Don't tell me what to do." And just like I was always first to stand up and do the dishes, I would now need to stand up and be the first one to volunteer to take care of her when she came home from the hospital.

"I will stay with them when you go back to Pasadena," I said to Auntie Ona.

Her response was quick. I could tell that she was expecting me to offer my services. "Your dad will be here too, Annie, and Uncle Dave and Uncle John. You don't have to take this all on yourself," she said. "I will come back as soon as I can. Uncle Don is home alone with Lisa and Greg. Plus, he has to work. We have hired a woman from the church to take them to school and then take care of them when they get home but it's still a lot for Uncle Don to handle by himself."

I was the reasonable choice. I had lived with them on and off my whole life from when I was a baby. I was used to them and they were comfortable with me. Unlike my uncles and my dad, they knew that they could depend on me. They knew if I said I would be there, I would be there.

Auntie Ona didn't mention Daddy's girlfriend, so I didn't bring her up. I wondered how long it would be now that Grandma needed all of us to help out before I would meet her.

So I stayed the summer and saw Grandma through some of her Chemotherapy treatments and the Cobalt radiation that burned right through her abdomen to the skin on her lower back. Daddy came by the house everyday when I left for work so that Grandma and Grandpa weren't left alone for the first two months. When they both seemed to be adjusting to Grandma's physical reactions to the Chemotherapy, I moved back home just before I started my senior year. And then finally, Daddy invited me to come to his apartment for dinner.

The Lake Terrace Apartments are on the corner of Lawrence Expressway and Benton Street in Sunnyvale. Their living room and dining room had a view, and access to the lake and all of the ducks swimming around in it. The ducks had pooped on their patio and shrubs, so I didn't understand what the big deal was about the ducks and this lake, but they seemed to really like it.

Diane looked up when she saw me peek around the corner into their tiny galley kitchen. She stood holding the wooden salad forks in each hand, only putting them down to quickly shake hands with me and to say hello in a raspy smoker's voice, and then after washing her hands, she went right back to tossing the salad. I figured that she was nervous because she continued to busy herself in the kitchen while Daddy and I chatted in the living room even though everything seemed to already be prepared and ready to put on the table. *If it weren't for her round bulging bug-eyes, she could be pretty*, I thought. She had a trim figure and was on the short side, maybe five feet, and by her measurements,

I could see that she might be the person who belonged to the clothes that we had received in the mail a few years ago. I wondered what had made she and Daddy flee from their apartment in Los Angeles so quickly that they would have had to leave her clothes behind.

She wore tight white pants, high heels, and a sleeveless flowery blouse. She kept her hair short and ratted about two inches high and then layered over in tiny little petals all over her head. Her appearance made me think that she should be posing in the yard as a flower rather than cooking in the kitchen. Unlike my mother, a beauty with or without makeup, Diane had to work hard to even be mediocrely attractive. And she was young, maybe thirty or less but hardened probably from cocktailing or maybe even prostituting. I still didn't know if she and my dad were married, and probably would never know.

"Can I help you with something Diane," I asked—*always the polite child, that was how they all raised me.* Daddy sat down on the couch and let out a big sigh, probably feeling relieved to pass me off to Diane. He had two televisions side by side, both on at once, and without sound, as he watched two different football games.

"Yes, you can help me put our dinner on the table," she said, as she handed me the salad she had been tossing. And then she turned to my dad and said, "it's time to eat, Dan." I'm not sure if I had ever heard anyone call my dad Dan. He always went by Danny. Even his male friends called him Danny. But

what I *could* see was that there was a familiarity between them that told me they had been together for a long time.

After watching Diane toss the salad for the amount of time it would take to read *Ulysses*, I couldn't wait to taste it. I took one bite and immediately knew what attracted my dad to her. She had cut up iceberg lettuce in small bite-size chunks along with tomatoes, cucumbers, red, green, and yellow bell peppers, avocados, and sweet red onions. And then to add to this deliciousness she tossed in green onions that she had sliced thin, and hard-boiled eggs chopped up so fine I could hardly tell that she had used either one except that it added to the flavor of the simple vinegar and oil dressing, and salt and pepper. My mother had given up iceberg lettuce a long time ago, because "it has no nutritional value," she would say. But I was willing to make the sacrifice for the wonderfully exotic flavors coming out of this vegetable concoction that I now indulged myself in. It would be a fierce competition if my mother and Diane entered a salad-making contest.

Daddy was picky about his salads. I remembered that now from living with him as a child. He demanded that every tiny bit of the lettuce be washed and then dried completely before cutting it with a knife or breaking it up with your fingers. He said that if there is water left behind it will dilute the dressing. I have often wondered where a small-town Norwegian boy raised in a logger's cookhouse environment got his fine tastes in cuisine. Perhaps from my mother's

side of the family. I didn't know, I just knew that it existed, and with a poorly made salad, he could get quite cranky in a big hurry.

Diane had baked sweet and spicy short ribs in a slow-cooking oven all afternoon. She also served twice-baked potatoes, stuffed with cheese and sour cream, but I hardly noticed anything else she had made after tasting the salad.

"Diane, this salad is delicious," I said. "What's your secret?"

So now Diane finally could take center stage and talk about something. She went on and on about how important it is to toss a salad for at least five minutes and to always add a chopped boiled egg to the dressing. I giggled at the thought of Grandma Wagle chopping up iceberg lettuce with a knife and then throwing chopped tomatoes on top, all in a big salad bowl, untossed, and then putting a small dish of mayonnaise, mixed with a little catsup on the table to plop on top of your own salad. As Grandma got older, she discovered bottled Thousand Island dressing at the grocery store and gave up the catsup and mayonnaise creation that she thought was so modern.

While we ate, Daddy kept both eyes on the two football games, so after Diane finished talking about her salad secrets, the three of us sat quietly and ate the rest of our dinner.

Uncomfortable with the silence, I said, "I take it you have a bet on these games, Daddy,"

"Yea, it's starting to look like I might only break even with the point spreads," he said shaking his head.

"Where do you work around here?" I asked.

"Work?" He paused and turned his head to look at me quizzically and then realized what I was asking. "Oh, work." He always referred to his line of business as "work." "There's a steak house in Palo Alto between the El Camino and California Street that has a club in the back. I will be working there for a while and then in Hayward. I'm helping Grandpa out too, doin' a little painting and paperhanging."

"So will you be going back to LA or are you moving home permanently?" I asked.

"Geeze, I don't know, Annie. What's with all the questions?"

"Just curious. Making conversation, that's all. I'm not prying into your personal business."

"It's harder for me to make a living here. I will tell you that. There are more clubs and bookies in Gardena. It's tough for me here, but I have to be here for Grandma and Grandpa right now. My brothers don't help out and Auntie Ona has her own family to take care of. And we can't ask more of you when you have school and you work too." He seemed irritated now and I wondered why. It wasn't like he was giving us more money if he lived in Gardena or less money when he lived here. He wasn't giving us any money at all, *so what did it matter to me,* I wondered. *Why was he trying to make me feel guilty? He only had himself and Diane to take care of.* His actions made it crystal clear to me that his

parents had always been and always will be much more important to him than us. *It wouldn't be this way if my mother's father had lived*, I thought.

Diane got up looking uncomfortable with the sparing going on between Daddy and me and started busying herself. How impolite of us after she had made such a nice dinner. I stood up and helped her clear the table, but she insisted on washing the dishes herself. She had a system. She filled the sink with hot soapy water, washed and rinsed the dishes and then put them in the dishwasher. No chance of passing colds or the flu under her roof. When I was saying my goodbyes, Diane was scrubbing the kitchen floor. *So Daddy had taken up with Mrs. Clean. Grandma didn't even do that.*

I wondered if I would get an invite back after the way I had behaved. It really didn't matter because my senior year had turned chaotic for me between working twenty-one to twenty-eight hours a week and then taking senior English in place of a study center, which gave me six classes to take instead of the required five. I barely had enough time to check on Grandma and Grandpa. To make life even harder, Mom moved us again, even farther away from Del Mar, this time into a small house in Saratoga. I was able to use my senior privileges to stay at Del Mar and Mickey used the address of a friend.

The good thing was that this house was smaller and didn't emphasize our lack of furniture like the house on De Tracey. We didn't have a living room in this house so we didn't have a great big room with nothing in it to show off the fact that we didn't have enough money to furnish every room in the house. I didn't

bother to explain this to my friends, but I'm sure they thought it a little odd since they all had enough furniture. The new house was simple: three bedrooms, two bathrooms, a living room, kitchen, and family dining area—our furniture more than enough to fill every space.

Grandma Wagle had gained all but ten of the pounds she had lost while she was going through her cancer treatments. Her hair was growing in curly like her brother's, Uncle Kinx (she thought that was so funny), and for the first time ever she started wearing bright-colored pants suits instead of dresses.

Her doctors were encouraged by the way she had bounced back so quickly after such a horrendous surgery, followed by an aggressive attack on any cancer cells that may have been lurking around in her body. She could stand in her kitchen again too. She had enough energy to make lefse with the leftover potatoes after dinner, and she also started making her famous white cake with chocolate frosting that she kept on top of her refrigerator waiting to be served to her guests. We were back to normal—for now at least.

Grandpa had taken on another baseball team besides the San Francisco Giants—the Oakland A's. These two teams were a great pastime for him to sit at his desk between the kitchen and the living room and listen to the games on the radio. Once in a while he would actually go to a game, but he never watched them on television.

Having to take care of Grandma and keep the business going was aging him fast though. His red hair had turned completely grey now and was thinning on the sides and top. His face showed more deep creases than ever before, and his shoulders sloped, giving him a hunchback. But in spite of all he had been through the last few months, he still told outrageous stories about growing up in North Dakota, and Grandma still told him that he "exaggerated so." And even though he was tired and worn out from everyday life, listening to baseball games gave him a pick-me-up like nothing else. His eyes brightened whenever I walked through the door because he knew that he could recap all of the wonderful things the A's had done, and he knew that I would listen to him like I really cared. One would think that he had given birth to the A's himself.

Nana was so different—healthy and strong. She bowled once a week and ate so much garlic, her skin reeked of it. But she was perpetually angry with us. She had gotten married a few days after I had turned fifteen. Grandpa Carl was a tall Danish man named Carl Nielson. His friends called him Swede, but we called him Grandpa Carl. And as nice as Grandpa Carl was to us, he still joined Nana every time we saw them in nagging us about why we never came over, and why we never call. Of course when we do go over to their house, they sit and watch *Columbo* reruns or *Wheel of Fortune*, pausing the television only to talk to us during the commercials that Grandpa mutes with his nifty channel changer.

Nana grossly lacked our attention and constantly wanted to know what she had done to deserve the way we treated her. With a full time job and making

sure that Mickey, Cindy, and I are on the straight and narrow, Mom has little time to call Nana every day, and even if Mom did call her every day, it wouldn't be enough for Nana.

When I finally had time to stop by, I had to listen to the standard lecture about how she is going to die soon, and when she does die, I will be so sorry for not spending more time with her. I would try to explain the busyness of working and going to school at the same time, not to mention my social life, but when all else fails, when the conversation has nowhere else to go but straight into the toilet, I pull out my ace card and talk about Grandma Wagle. Upon hearing this, Nana's eyes would slope down, her lips pooched out, and her nose scrunched up, and then she would ask, "Oh, how *is* Mrs. Wagle doing?" I could never figure out why she called two people of equal status Mr. and Mrs. Wagle when they called her by her first name—Mary. Maybe she just felt that much younger. But I *had* learned to play her own guilt game, making her the victim instead of me.

To my surprise, Daddy continued to call and make dates with me, possibly so that I could get to know Diane better. He didn't seem intimidated that Mom jerked him in and out of court, and I suspected that his sudden interest in me was to play on my sympathies and get me to take his side. I found it hard to believe that he actually showed up for his court dates and then cried big crocodile tears to the judge about how poor he was since he had been taking care of his ailing parents and all (no mention of his girlfriend) making him flat broke.

When I found out that Diane was only a few years older than I was, it didn't make us any closer. There still seemed to be a huge generation gap between us, and the more we got to know each other, the more she became more of a mother than a friend or my dad's girlfriend. And, yes, each time I had dinner at their apartment, she washed the dishes with hot soapy water before putting them into the dishwasher, and then followed that by washing the kitchen floor. The only thing she allowed me to do was to place the bowls or platters of food on the table and take the bowls or platters of food off of the table.

To complicate matters, Daddy repeatedly complained to me when we were alone that Diane was an alcoholic and that she broke into unexpected rages, making life miserable for him. I never saw her take more than one drink at a time. And even that one drink she sipped slowly, so I wondered if he was just making things up about her. Of course, why would he do that? Nothing with Daddy and Diane made sense to me.

Diane didn't last long after that. One day she was there and the next day she had vanished. Every trace of her was completely gone from the apartment. She either left on her own, or Daddy made her leave. The only thing I knew was that he made it sound like the breakup was mutual. *You mean mutual like when you left your wife and kids to fend for themselves?* I wondered.

I felt sorry for Diane and wondered where she had gone. I wanted to talk to her. I wanted her to know that I know what it feels like to be abandoned. After getting to know her, I actually started to like her a little bit, but never once did I

confide in her. She even let me help her wash the dishes one time when I was there for dinner. Never the floor. Just the dishes. And Daddy seemed more civilized with Diane in his life. Seeing the two of them together helped me to give up on the romantic idea of my parents getting back together one day. But that fantasy was all over now, with or without Diane.

I thought about her a lot after she left and wondered how she was doing. I didn't know why I suddenly liked her so much. I just did. Maybe it was because I knew what it feels like to be the underdog in my dad's life—last on his list. And maybe I felt sorry for her. I didn't know how or why she was with him. My imagination ran wild, and when I asked my dad, he made their relationship sound very mysterious. I wondered if he had saved her from a mean pimp or an unsavory prostitution ring. Their relationship did have the look of a savior and a person being saved, especially with their age difference.

With so many secrets and knowing so little about my dad, I couldn't help but feel confused. My mom and Mickey and Cindy and I needed him and yet he was always helping everyone else. And while I could understand him helping his parents, I could not figure out how he could turn his back on his own son for someone else's son. Mickey played baseball in our San Jose Little League and he needed Daddy to at least come to his games and yet, after Diane left, Daddy took up with a woman who had a son Mickey's age and Daddy seemed to think that *her* son needed him more than Mickey did, so he went to his girlfriend's son's baseball games instead. And Mom deserved to be compensated for

having to support us by herself, but I could clearly see now that his girlfriends and their offspring took precedence over us. I will show him though. I will find a rich boyfriend, and Mom will marry Cliff, and Cindy will find herself a rich boyfriend, and Daddy will be sorry for the way he has treated us.

Soon after Diane left and not long after Mom had gone face to face with Daddy in court, the police department or the FBI, ransacked Daddy's apartment. Daddy thought that it was the FBI because they took off all of the slipcovers on his sofas, cut through his mattress, and took off every single electrical plate cover. This all happened when he wasn't home so he didn't know for sure who had done it. It may have been one of his thug friends looking for money or drugs. What occurred to me at times was that if this was actually police-related, Daddy was just the flip side of the men who were trying to put him in jail, so maybe he should just go to work for the other side. He certainly was good at it.

What is that god-awful noise? I wondered. I was willing myself to wake up and to find out what sound kept annoying the deep sleep I was enjoying. *Where was I anyway? If I could just open my eyes, I could find out.* The noise stopped and then I heard Grandpa's voice. "Sweetheart, your dad's on the phone." I forced my eyes open slightly and looked up at my grandfather standing over me.

My lips were dry and cracked. My throat was on fire. "What time is it?"

"I don't know," Grandpa said. "I think it's after two."

Grandpa had stretched the cord as far as he could without having to make me move. I took the receiver without raising my head. “Daddy?” I managed to rasp out.

“Hey, Annie Joy, wake up,” he said.

“I’m awake. What time is it?”

“I don’t know. I think it’s after two.”

“That’s exactly what Grandpa just said. Doesn’t anyone know what time it is?” I grouched.

“It doesn’t matter. I need your help.”

I had fallen asleep on my grandparent’s sofa after a long evening spent at the hospital with Grandma. She had been complaining again about having pains in her stomach when she went to the bathroom, combined with diarrhea and constipation, and blood. Another exploratory surgery left her without most of her colon and now she would have to move her bowels into a bag attached to her stomach.

“What’s the matter Daddy?” I asked.

“I need you to bring me my gun,” he said.

“Where is it?”

“It’s in the middle bedroom.” And then he gave me this long explanation of a false drawer, and then behind something, and then to take out something, and then you will see it underneath the drawer that you just pulled out. “You need to be really careful. It’s loaded. And don’t let Grandpa know what you are doing.”

“Okay,” I said still half asleep.” “Where are you?”

The directions weren’t as complicated as finding the gun itself. “I will meet you on the corner of Castro and The El Camino in Mountain View in an hour,” he said.

“I need to pull myself together and make sure that Grandpa is asleep,” I said. “I will be there as soon as I can.”

When I got to where he was, he opened the passenger side of my Volkswagen and took the paper lunch bag sitting on my front seat. “Thanks honey,” he said. “I’ll catch up with you later and maybe we can have dinner.”

“What time is it?” I asked.

“It’s after four. Go home and go back to sleep. I’ll call you at Grandma’s.” He slammed the door and he disappeared.

I woke up to the pungent odor of toast burning and the sound of scraping wondering if I had had a bad dream or if I had actually gotten up and took Daddy a gun. Grandpa stood at the sink trying to salvage what was left of a charred piece of white bread. He had made hobo coffee, and when he saw me, he moved quickly toward the stove to pour the coffee through the strainer into my cup. I was still in the clothes that I had worn to the hospital the night before and I felt punk from so little sleep.

“No toast, just coffee,” I said. “Have you heard anything from Grandma?”

“I’m leaving in a few minutes to drive out there,” Grandpa said.

Grandma's treatments were now at Stanford Hospital and she had been admitted only yesterday for the surgery. We were numb to anything that might happen next. Grandma was in God's hands.

"I will stay here and straighten up the house and clean the bathrooms. I am supposed to have dinner with Daddy tonight. Are you planning to stay at the hospital all day?" I asked.

"Oh, ya know, that reminds me. There are some plants out in the backyard that need water. Grandma was watering them for your dad."

"Sure, no problem," I said.

I stood over the plants in the location Grandpa had pointed to earlier, the hose in my hand. *Curious looking plants*, I thought. *And he had Grandma watering them.*

Chapter X

They Pulled Me Back In

It was like Michael Corleone said in the third Godfather movie. "Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in." I was tired of the drama. Mom and I had become two female wolves ready to do battle over what was best for our family. There was just one problem. I wasn't the real mother wolf of this family. I needed to step outside and look inside the window for a change. I needed to mind my own business. Mickey and Cindy needed to reconnect with Mom, and I needed to go away quietly and pitch my own tent someplace else, and then someday have my own family, to live where the rules are my rules. But when the telephone rang in the early morning hours on a Thursday, everything changed. The two mama wolves had to pull together and forget about their differences . . . for now anyway.

My mother could only cry in a weak voice and say "Mickey, Mickey."

"What happened Mom?" I asked. "Mom tell me, what is it? What happened to Mickey?" This was the first time I had heard from her in weeks, since she slapped me across the face, pointed her index finger at the front door, and told me to get out of *her* house.

"I don't know," she sobbed. "He's in the hospital. They just told me to come."

My heart felt like it was going to explode any minute. I wanted to know, but at the same time, I didn't want to know. "Is he alive?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said.

"I'm on my way," I said.

After I graduated from high school, and returned home from a three-week vacation in Hawaii with Mrs. Mannina, Susan Mannina, and Karen DiFore, Mom was clearly "sick and tired" of me and my new-found freedoms to come and go as I pleased and to make up my own rules, so I temporarily lived with Grandma and Grandpa Wagle again and then rented an apartment off of Meridian Avenue a block away from 280 with Susan Fairbanks, a long-time high school friend. She couldn't go to Hawaii with us because she couldn't afford it, but she was equally as close to me as Susan M. and Karen D.

We had lived in the little house in Saratoga for exactly one year when the owner decided to move back in, so Mom had moved us to a four-apartment complex off of Leigh Avenue near Blackford Junior High, where I had gone to middle school, and not far from Del Mar High School while I was in Hawaii. We were finally back in our old neighborhoods and in the school district we had left two years ago. Mickey wouldn't have to lie about his address for his junior and senior year, but I still gave him a note in my handwriting at the beginning of the year in case he needed me to write an excuse note for him.

I rushed to my mother's apartment to find her waiting impatiently for me with the front door open. "He's at Valley Medical Center," she said. But when we

walked around the corner of her apartment to her carport, we stood in disbelief as we stared at the empty space.

"Okay, let's take my car," I snapped. We were in shock thinking about what might have happened to Mickey, and we knew now whose car he was in when he got hurt.

After the doctor gave us a brief explanation, we walked down the long corridor to look for Mickey's room.

"Mickey is alive Mom. That's all that matters," I said. "You don't have to kill him now. You can do it later when he gets back on his feet. Okay?"

"I know," she said quietly. Our feet sounded like lead weights as we lumbered along the hospital's linoleum floor to his room, relieved to know he was okay and exhausted from the last hour of not knowing what condition he was in.

Mickey was sedated. His face was bruised and scratched and his leg was in a cast. The doctor said that he had ten stitches in the back of his head. But he was the most beautiful sight I had ever seen. More beautiful than Shakespeare's sonnets. More beautiful than any sunset I had ever seen on the beaches in Hawaii. More beautiful than a botanical garden in full bloom. I couldn't imagine, at that very moment, ever wanting to beat the shit out of him for touching me with his knee or poking his index finger into my cheek.

His dark brown hair, hung heavily over his forehead. Mom pushed it back gently away from his face. We stood on either side of the bed not knowing whether to yell at him to wake him up and demand answers, or to hug him gently

to let him know we were there for him. He opened his eyes finally and just looked at us without saying anything. I knew in that moment when I looked in his eyes that he had become his own worst critic and that we couldn't say anything to him to make him feel any worse than he was already making himself feel.

Mom blamed herself for not being around enough to make sure he didn't get into trouble, and of course, she blamed Daddy for being an absent father. And I blamed myself for letting him get away with stuff that I should have been telling my mother he was doing.

"I rolled your car Mom," he said. "I'm sorry."

The police report said that my mom's little white Volkswagen (that she had worked so hard to pay off by herself) had rolled four times and that if Mickey had been wearing his seatbelt he probably wouldn't have survived the accident. His friend, Kenny Robles, was in the passenger seat, and was okay, but the driver's side was completely smashed in. Mickey had been thrown through the window during one of the rolls. He and Kenny walked several miles to Saratoga Springs—Mickey on a broken leg with a ten-stitch gash on the back of his head. When they got to Saratoga Springs, they called the CHP for help. The CHP towed the totaled VW to the police station, and took Mickey and Kenny to the hospital. We never saw Mom's Volkswagen again. It was totaled.

Mickey planned this heist very carefully, with precision, thought, and malice. Before the accident, he made a duplicate car key so that he could have access to Mom's car whenever he had the urge to take his friends out for a joy

ride. Unfortunately, the first time was the night that he wrecked her car. Mickey and Kenny waited patiently until Mom was snuggled in her bed sound asleep, precisely at midnight. They then released the emergency brake, put the car in neutral, and backed the car out of the carport and into the street. Once they had the car in the street, they felt safe enough to put the spare key into the ignition and start the car without waking Mom. Why they thought this little Volkswagen engine would wake her up, I do not know. Mom could sleep through a train a foot away from her bed during a seven-point earthquake.

Once they got onto Leigh Avenue, they knew they were home free and raced around San Jose for about three hours. Of course, racing, by definition, a pokey little '66 Volkswagen was not the easiest thing to do so they got their kicks going as fast as they could around corners. In fact, a lot of corners. When they got as far as the end of Sanborn Road off of Highway 9, at what we used to call Little Castle Rock, they decided to take a rest before heading home. By this time it was around four o'clock in the morning and they realized that school would be starting in four hours, which was not a problem for Mickey because he knew that I would be the one writing his excuse, but Kenny had missed too much school already, so they started down the windy hill. Mickey, tired from being out all night, continued to race around the sharp turns keeping his speed at about 25 MPH when all of a sudden the car started rolling. Fortunately, Kenny only ended up with a sore knee. It could have been much worse.

So, in a matter of two months, I went from bringing my dad a gun for God only knows what reason, to watering his marijuana plants in Grandma and Grandpa's back yard, with Grandma just getting out of surgery for colon cancer, to my brother rolling my mother's Volkswagen and almost losing his life. I didn't think that Daddy had murdered anybody. At least I hadn't heard about anyone getting shot to death. Maybe he just needed the gun for protection or to threaten somebody with it. It didn't matter. It was none of my business. There were some things that I was better off not knowing, and this was one of them. If I had been more awake when he called me, I might have told him to go suck eggs, which is what I should have done in the first place. I wondered what my friends would think if they knew.

Harrett met my dad when he was home from Chico State during the Christmas break. He wasn't expecting to see him standing in my grandparent's kitchen, and somehow he just knew that it was the illusive father that he had heard little about, the one who had been living in Los Angeles all this time, the one who lived at The Lake Terrace Apartments in Sunnyvale, and then moved back to Los Angeles. It was hard keeping track of Daddy's comings and goings or where he would live next. Harrett didn't speak. In fact, he couldn't speak. He looked like he was trying to speak. His mouth was open, but the words just didn't come out. He walked straight toward him with his hand out to politely shake hands. Introductions were unnecessary, and then we left for our date.

Things had not been good between Mom and me after I got back from Hawaii. And while she was happy for me that I had saved up the money to pay for my trip, she was unhappy that she had to move without me. And to make matters worse, Cliff had to go to Germany for a Volkswagen conference. She was feeling completely unprotected from having to deal with her misbehaving kids all by herself.

Tommy Bonasera had given me a full-time job at Bona Sera Plymouth City right out of high school doing accounts receivable and also handling the collections for leased cars. This was hard to pass up. *I could always go to college later,* I thought. But Mom said that if I didn't go to college full time, I would have to move out of the house, which was my purpose for taking the full-time job in the first place. I just didn't think she meant for me to move out immediately.

I had lived with Susan F. for exactly one month when I came back to our apartment late at night with a date to find every single dish, glass, cup, and piece of silverware used and then left all over the kitchen. If my rollers had not been strewn all over the coffee table in the living room, I would have thought that she had had a big party. No. She had trashed the place all by herself, and she was in bed fast asleep. She had always been a slob, but I didn't want to live quite this sloppy, so I packed up my few belongings and moved back to Grandma and Grandpa's house, who needed my help anyway.

For six weeks, Mickey hobbled around in his cast, but still managed to get himself to work at The Cardiff everyday after school. Mom had set up a deduction plan for money to come out of his check every month to pay her back for any out-of-pocket expenses that were not covered under her car insurance from the wreck. Mickey was in his junior year at Del Mar, and I wondered if he would live long enough to graduate. Daddy was no help. On the day I took Mom to pick up her new Volkswagen, she was delivering her standard lecture about how I should be in college instead of working full time and I said, “Mom, I’m eighteen now. I know everything there is to know. There isn’t anything anyone could possibly teach me that I don’t already know.”

A Perfect Day to Die

On July 18, 1983 my dad gave me a book called *Life Extension, A Practical Scientific Approach,* written by Durk Pearson and Sandy Shaw, two of the ugliest people I have ever seen in my life, and I decided that I wanted nothing to do with extending my life if there was the slightest chance that I might look like either one of these people.

Daddy wrote in the back of the book:

Annie,

Hope you enjoy this as much as I have,

love you

Dad

P.S. maybe we can compare notes in 50 or 60 years

After Daddy decided to extend his life and that this book would be the vehicle to help him do that, he visited a warehouse called Twin Labs in Mountain View whenever he stayed with my family. Of course, just as I was the driver out to Bay Meadows, I was also the driver out to Twin Labs. I still took him out to the track, but a vitamin run was always on our agenda. If he didn't have time to come home, he had me order vitamins for him from Vitamin Research Products, a vitamin company that Pearson and Shaw owned.

At his apartment complex in Las Vegas, he was known as "the juice man," because he took his juice maker down to the community kitchen everyday and

made carrot juice for a group of residents. He also took Beta Carotene supplements just to make sure that he got enough if the carrot juice wasn't enough. His skin turned orange as a result. He kept olive oil and vegetable oil in the refrigerator for fear that the oils would become rancid. He told me that drinking rancid oils will age my skin and will also become toxic in my system, and I must put all of my oils in the refrigerator immediately. Regularly, he consumed a food preservative with the thought that if a food preservative can preserve foods, then it must be able to preserve your body.

Daddy practiced the methods of Pearson and Shaw until he was diagnosed with Diabetes in 1985, and then I never heard another word about this creepy looking pair and their life-extending methods. He had overloaded his liver with vitamins, a food preservative, and carrot juice, causing him to become really sick. He left my home in San Jose with cold, clammy hands—scared to death—and took the next flight back to Vegas. His doctor put him into the hospital immediately where he spent the next several days getting his diet back on track. It was shortly after that that he found out he had hepatitis C, and then liver cancer, as well as heart problems. Unfortunately, he still smoked, but he deduced that if a person takes the right kind of vitamins, his body would heal itself from what the nicotine was doing to his lungs.

I visited him in Las Vegas with my sixteen-year-old son during my third unhappy marriage in 1993. Daddy picked Dustin and me up at the airport and surprised us with Auntie Ona in tow. The plan was that Dustin and I would stay

at the Rio, Auntie Ona and Uncle Don would sleep in Daddy's bed at his apartment, and Daddy would sleep on one of his couches. But when we got to the Rio, the hotel had us booked into a room for the disabled. Daddy didn't like that arrangement, so he made one of his famous scenes, and we left with no plan at all except to sleep at his house, Dustin on the floor between Daddy and I on the sofas, which was a lot more fun.

At the time, Daddy had been blackballed from all of the hotels and casinos in Las Vegas, Reno, and Lake Tahoe except for the Rio. Apparently, he was running a poker game out of a hotel room in Reno and he got caught. His name and picture were placed in their "bad boy" book, and he spent a number of years financially struggling before he could get back in their good standing.

Spending the weekend with my favorite aunt and uncle, my dad, and my son was one of the most memorable nights that I have ever had. Auntie Ona, Dustin, Daddy, and I played Scrabble until well after midnight. And while Daddy didn't set a good example for his own kids when he turned over the Scrabble board, he usually behaved himself in front of his grandchildren. In the morning, we all got a tall glass of carrot juice.

By this time, Daddy had stopped making carrot juice for his friends at the apartment complex. He had decided that he wanted to be compensated for the wear and tear of his juice maker, and for the cost of the two big boxes of carrots he had been buying everyday. He believed that the apartment complex should

be the compensator. When they refused, he stopped making all of them carrot juice.

Once he got his diabetes under control, limiting himself to one small glass of carrot juice per day and a reasonable amount of vitamins, he began to age naturally. I mean as naturally as a person could who had used drugs to stay awake for up to four days at a time, and then used drugs to fall into a dead sleep. He never stopped smoking, but he did slow down on his drinking a bit. I can't honestly say that he was ever a big drinker, but for a diabetic, even minimal amounts of alcohol could be deadly. The Hepatitis C was followed by Liver cancer and then heart disease.

But when the phone rang at 5:30 AM on Friday, September 13, 2002, I knew that he was gone. Now married happily to my fourth husband, Tim handed me the phone. My brother's voice simply said, "Daddy's dead." My brother didn't call our dad daddy. He called him pops, but ever the kind and respectful brother, he referred to him as Daddy for my sister and me—a strange term of endearment for a person who merely made guest appearances in our lives. I asked my brother what he wanted me to do.

"Can you be available around noon?" Mickey asked somberly.

"Yes I can. I have to attend a workshop this morning at school. It will be over by lunch time." My voice sounded sterile. I didn't know what to say. He had just lost his father too. Am I supposed to tell him how sorry I am? How sorry I am for all of the lost years the three of us shared without a father? How sorry I

am that the person my sister and I called daddy, and my brother called pops, preferred a life of crime to a life with his wife and children? There were no words appropriate for the three of us—no words that would ease a lifetime of abandonment and the shame that comes with having a criminal for a father.

"I need to have you and Cindy sign some papers in front of a notary," Mickey said. "We can have lunch when we're finished."

"Okay," I said and hung up the phone.

I stayed in bed for a few minutes longer staring at the ceiling, just thinking. The last time he was here, he had gotten into a car accident and totaled his car. He felt bad because he had made a right turn in front of an oncoming car. The accident was his fault, and I think it was then that he realized that he shouldn't drive anymore. The tough guy had become fragile, and he was afraid of being hurt by something or someone.

Just before the call came, my husband said that he had had a dream, and in it he saw my dad's bloody face and floating in the air around his face were five or six numbers, maybe for the lotto, keno, or crap tables in Vegas. After ten years, my husband has still never played those numbers. We are not gamblers. It seemed so odd to me. While my dad was playing games of chance, my career was learning how to keep college students in their seats.

I needed to go to work that day. It wasn't just any day. I couldn't call in a death. I was attending a student retention seminar at Heald College, where I was working at the time. This was my Black Jack game and the stakes were

much higher for me. I let the front desk know that I was expecting an important phone call, and that they would have to interrupt me in the seminar.

Mickey called around 11:00 and said that he had just received the papers we needed to sign and have notarized. Once we signed the papers, Daddy's ashes could now be sent home in a cardboard box. The whole thing cost each of us $297.00. It's truly ironic that, as a father, he provided so little financial support, and then we ended up getting stuck with a bill to dispose of his remains, not to mention the expense of the party my brother and his wife gave at their house in his honor.

Once I found the strength to get out of bed there was only a deafening silence in my head. I turned on the shower, and I wondered about his last thoughts. I thought about how my brother, sister, and I had chosen not to travel to Las Vegas to spend his last days with him because we didn't want to take the chance on becoming victims of his debts. Being victims of his abandonment had been hard enough. I thought about his brilliant mind and what a wasted life he had chosen for himself. *So this is what the death of a parent feels like,* I thought. *Thank God it wasn't my mother. The pain would be a million times worse.*

The hot water seemed to temporarily distract me from my thoughts. The words, "daddy's dead" were a relief in many ways. It meant that his physical pains were now gone. He had suffered with diabetes for nineteen years, which was probably the result of his lifestyle, along with all of those vitamins he had taken, and the massive amounts of carrot juice he had drunk.

The last few months of his life, his abdominal cavity continually filled with fluid to the point that he could not even bend over to pick something up—a ghastly misery for him. He had to keep going to the doctor so that the doctor could drain out the fluid.

But, with daddy dead it also meant that my brother, sister and I, as well as our spouses, were free of having to figure out what to do with him during the holidays or at any other function my mother and stepfather might be attending. One of us would have to make the sacrifice and have Christmas at home with him, or if somebody was getting married or graduating, one of us would just keep him out of our mother's sight.

Two weeks prior to his death, my husband and I came in from our usual Sunday walk to Starbucks, and there was a message from him. He always picked this time to leave the guilt message. His gravely voice resonated on the answering machine. "This is your father. I guess you're not picking up the phone because you know it's me. I'll call you back." I called him back as soon as I walked in the door, explaining that we were out walking the way we always do on Sunday mornings. This particular day was somehow different. I didn't know that it would be our last conversation. He told me that my nephew's wife had picked out an unusual name for their unborn baby daughter.

My response was, "Oh no, please don't tell me they are naming her after you." This made him laugh, since I had been named after him and then ended up changing my name.

"No," he said, "don't worry. It sounds like a normal name, I just can't remember right off hand."

My dad could not have picked a more perfect day to die out of the 364 others available to him—Friday the thirteenth. All of his valuable energy and time in the pursuit of cheating others, and he died penniless with not enough money to pay his PG&E bill. After his death, my brother, sister, and I would not even go to Las Vegas to settle his estate, because we were afraid of someone making us responsible for any debt he may have incurred.

The strangest thing about that day was that I had shed no tears until I had to call my son late in the afternoon to tell him that his grandfather had passed. My son, my five nephews, and my niece were all very close to their grandfather for the simple reason that the adults were selective about what they told them, and my dad's flare for the extravagant—expensive clothes, lots of cash in his wallet, free hotel rooms and meals in Vegas—always impressed the hell out of them.

I met my brother and sister at noon at the property management firm where my sister worked for in Cupertino. My brother pulled up on his Harley, which was as big as a car. *So why doesn't he just drive a car*, I wondered. And since he has proven himself such a bad driver, I have a problem with his motorcycle infatuation. The first is safety of course, and now that he is a successful business owner and father of three equally successful adult children, the

motorcycle thing just does not compute with me. I guess I just thought that on this particular day he would pull up in a car.

The three of us got into my sister's van. Cindy is one of those drivers that we should all receive warnings about when she is on the road. Her mind goes in fifty different directions at once. When her focus should be on her driving, she is usually on her cell phone, or changing tapes, or carrying on a conversation with whomever is in the backseat. Yes, and on occasion she does all three at once. She is a one-person thrill ride! Today was no different, and I was wondering why we let her drive in the first place. Her scattered behavior has always left me a bit unnerved.

She pushed in Kenny Loggins's *Footloose* tape into the CD player, and turned it up so loud that my brother and I couldn't hear a word she was saying. As the oldest, I thought that I should take control of the situation, and tapped her on the shoulder and yelled from the backseat, "Could you show a little respect and turn that down or just shut it off. We've just lost our father." On any other day, she would respect my wishes and do what I asked her to do, but not this time. She glanced back at me and flashed me a Mona-Lisa half smile with droopy sarcastic eyes, and then reached for the knob and turned the radio up even louder, setting the mood for the rest of the afternoon. It was the defining moment, really. It was liberation day for us, and with this particular song playing we were now starting to feel a bit giddy. Why not!! What's done is done! My dad never took us seriously until we had his grandchildren. It is so seldom that

the three of us can let our hair down without our children watching. This should be a day of relief—of letting all of the pain and sadness go.

After the paperwork was signed at the notary, we met my brother's wife for a late lunch. She and my brother picked out a restaurant that neither my sister or I could afford, so I assumed that they were paying, and the first thing my brother did was to have a confrontation with the waiter about his drink order. I leaned over the table and whispered, "He's going to spit in your drink. I hope you enjoy it." I don't remember going anywhere with Daddy that he didn't make an issue out of something. He tried to tip a woman at Macy's one time for wrapping a bunch of Christmas presents for him. The poor thing was not allowed to take tips and instead of just thanking her, he used her as an example of what losers we all are in San Jose. I think that Daddy must have taken over Mickey's brain about now to make him behave this way.

After we had a drink and got some food into our systems, we relaxed and spent some quality time talking about our favorite subject—our children. After lunch, I went home to face the dirty deed of telling my son that his grandfather was gone and how sorry I was to have to bring him this sad news. Three weeks later, my son would lose his other grandfather.

The following day, my husband and I went to the Farmer's Market in Sunnyvale and ran a number of errands, preparing for Daddy's party, which would be held at my brother's home in Morgan Hill. Tim's car was low on gas so we took mine.

We were in and out of my car most of the day. On Sunday, I had to have my nails done, and when I went to get into my car, there was a tiny black box sitting in the middle of my seat that had not been there the day before. When I picked it up, I remembered what it was, but couldn't remember the last time I had seen it. It had not been on my seat the day before, and I turned to my husband, holding the little black contraption up for him to see.

"Did you put this on my seat?" I asked.

Tim looked at me confused, shaking his head no. "What is it?" He asked.

"My dad sent this to me a long time ago from Las Vegas. He thought it would keep me safe if I had to walk around late at night. I thought it was packed away somewhere. It has moved with me several times. When you pull out this little pin, it makes a deafening screeching sound to scare off an attacker," I said. "It was just sitting here in the middle of my seat."

"Where did it come from?" Tim asked.

I shook my head. "I don't know," I said.

Peanuts Café

I have often wondered how a little dive like Peanuts Café, located on San Fernando Street across from San Jose State, could stir up so many memories for my mother and, at the same time, raise so many questions for me.

I didn't know my parents when they were happy and newly in love. Most children don't. But my parents always seemed to have unfinished business. As a child, it didn't feel like they fell out of love. It just felt like life had gotten in the way of their love. My mother had grown up in a stable home, and her expectation was that she would marry my dad, and she would carry the stability into her own family. My dad had also grown up in a stable home, but for some unknown reason, he rejected the stability that his parents had offered. He was the classic bad boy that women couldn't resist no matter how much it was going to hurt in the end. My mother, the classic good girl, was off limits to him. Mom's parents kept her close to home. They wanted her to finish high school, find someone nice to marry, and raise a family, in that order. This formula was enticing to any bad boy. My dad needed to break the code, rescue the damsel in distress, take her away from her constrictive parents, and conquer her love, but what to do with her after that he hadn't a clue.

When he finally lost her for good, and he longed for her because she was no longer available, because she was happily married to my stepfather, I used to tell him, "Eat your heart out Daddy. You had your chance."

As he watched us grow up, have our own adult struggles, fall in love, have children, and, yes, get divorced (me three times), he was filled with regret that he had not been there for us, and that he had to take a back seat in our lives.

Cindy and Mickey and I were careful about what we told our children. We didn't want to turn them against their grandfather. We didn't want them to know what it was like not to trust someone so close to you. We never left them wanting for attention or love. Our children always knew that they were everything to us. We never left them in the car while we went in the grocery store to shop. We never made them feel unwanted or unloved, or made them eat things they didn't like, or put them to bed early just to get rid of them. Our children became our legacies, our kings and queens of the future. So the day Mom and I walked around the San Jose State campus, and we came across Peanuts Café, those old memories came into full view for my mom.

Peanuts Café is in the tiniest of strip malls by comparison to the strip malls built today. It shares its space with another business, taking up the majority of the space—maybe 30-feet long. The building is one story, tan with charcoal trim, ugly, and haphazardly painted red brick. There is a sign over the door that simply says—"Peanuts Café." No need to advertise. It is that busy. There are two entries, one on each side. The front is mostly windows that look out onto the busyness of the university. Their specialty is an old-fashioned 50s cheeseburger with French fries.

The day with mom began as an early April power walk through the campus so that she could see how much the campus had changed in the sixty years since she had last seen it. My mom and my stepfather were in town to have their taxes completed and to spend some time with my husband and me. I suggested a nice long walk to get us all out of the house. Unfortunately, when my step-dad saw the extent of the campus, he realized that it was over his head. My husband, a true saint, agreed to stay behind and take Dad on a car tour of downtown San Jose while Mom and I took the scenic route. And for her, it soon became a nostalgic walk down memory lane.

I have often wondered how my life would have turned out if I hadn't been raised by four young female wolves and a 36-year old grandmother who had just lost her husband to heart disease the year before I was born. These women displayed all of the wolf-like characteristics, even Nana: protective, fierce, and determined to rear me in their own image. With one of my grandfathers gone before I was born, and my dad, who was in and out of our house like a pesky fly, the sense of impermanence was ever-present. Fortunately, these female figures, so close to my own age, filled the ginormous hole these missing men left in, not only my growing up years, but those beyond when I could have used some guidance.

And since my mom, my aunts, and my grandmother are so close in age, we all shared many of the same memories from the fifties: Frank Sinatra, the

Hoola Hoop, Elvis Presley, Howdy Doody, Sky King, and of course, I was privy to all of their stories about *their* high school years.

Alum Rock Avenue, Santa Clara Street, and First Street were the "to-go places" to be in the fifties. These three streets were lined with restaurants, entertainment, and what was considered back then "high-end" shopping.

The Santa Clara Valley was at its best in the early to mid 1900s with lush dark brown rich soils, beautiful warm sunny weather, and just the right combination of fog and moisture—The Valley of the Heart's Delight—a well-earned name given to it by its grateful inhabitants.

Its perfect climate and soil are what attracted many Italians to this area, who had first made their home in upstate New York from their own perfect climate in Italy. Italians were not used to going without vegetables and tomatoes as they did on the East Coast—knowing what tomatoes can do for one's very soul and survival. *My* Italian family, on the other hand, must have had the inside scoop, because they went through Ellis Island and came directly to the Santa Clara Valley. The outlying areas of San Jose were mostly orchards and farms: apricot orchards in the Evergreen Valley, cherry orchards in Cupertino, and prune orchards in Campbell and San Jose.

Unincorporated areas like Willow Glen, Campbell, Saratoga, Cupertino, and Sunnyvale were not as connected to San Jose as they are today. Today, I can leave Sunnyvale and arrive at the SJSU campus in twenty minutes. The completion of I-280, extending from San Francisco through San Jose in the

1960s made this short commute possible. Without I-280, it was a day trip coming from Willow Glen to visit my cousins in Campbell as we packed up the station wagon with a change of clothes, food, and the beloved croquet set.

This is the memory path Mom and I will take today as we promenade through the SJSU campus and the memories it instills leading to our final destination: Peanuts Café.

"Do you think it might have been Peanuts, mom?" My mother and I stood on the opposite side of the street from the little restaurant, and then we looked back to study the Administration Building to our left. She looked back again, squinting at Peanuts Café. I watched Mom rummage through millions of miles of memory, pensive and deep in thought. The one problem I have noticed about growing older is that, while forgetting the past can be a blessing at times, forgetting the past is not always a blessing as Mom was demonstrating today. I wanted to bring her back to a time in her life that delivered happy memories, a time when her dad was still alive, a time before she met and married my dad. I began to wonder why this was so important to me. Would my newfound immediate need for the truth be a resolution for the feeling of impermanence that I had grown up with? Would I find this resolution in a little dive like Peanuts Café? And finally, was Peanuts Café actually the little restaurant my mother and her high school friends, my aunts, and possibly my dad, would have run across the street to

escape the stress of classes, much the same way San Jose State students do today?

As we trucked along at high speed—I was huffing and puffing—Mom, eighteen years my senior, walked effortlessly. Mental note: must get more exercise. Mom and I had discussed downtown San Jose many times, especially her old haunts, but today, walking through the campus, Mom surprised me with:

"Did you know that San Jose High School used to be on this campus and I went to school here?"

"No . . . I didn't." I said slowly. Maybe she is confused I thought.

My mother's family had lived in the East foothills of San Jose off Alum Rock Avenue. Back then, wealthy business and landowners occupied the spacious ranch homes, climbing gradually up the hill on Alum Rock Avenue, which lead to Alum Rock Park. In an attempt to make a connection between the location of their home and SJSU, I pointed out a bit condescendingly to Mom that Alum Rock Avenue seemed like a long way from San Jose State.

"I think I might have gotten there by bus," she said. "San Jose High was a three-year high school, and my sister went to James Lick High. James Lick was a four-year high school. I think it still is, isn't it?" Mom asked.

"Yes, it still is a four-year high school," I said.

Aunt Pat was a year behind Mom, and at the time my aunt was ready to go to high school, James Lick had only recently been built.

The thought of my mother attending high school on this campus where I now attend SJSU as an older graduate student later became a bit of an obsession for me. It was one of the pieces of the puzzle that was missing from all of the stories I had heard growing up.

As we continued our walk, I pointed out the reasonably new Martin Luther King Library (new to her because she had never seen it). I explained that MLK is a shared library between the City of San Jose and SJSU, and that it is working out well for both the city and the campus. Mom didn't seem impressed. She looked around at all of the changes, attempting to replace the new structures she saw today with her memories of the way the campus looked in the late forties.

"San Carlos Street used to go through the campus," she said.

"Yes, I think too many students were getting hit by cars. It also makes for a more inclusive closed college community and has kept the students safer from outsiders."

We walked east on the beautiful tree-lined esplanade that was once San Carlos Street toward the newly built Campus Village, which houses over 3,000 students, staff, and faculty. This area seemed to bring back memories for Mom, and I would now listen to the same stories I have listened to hundreds of times. She began talking about the Holland Creamery, once located at Twelfth and Santa Clara Streets, owned by Jack Allen.

"The Holland Creamery was our old stomping ground back then," she said. "We used to go to the Holland Creamery after a dance at the High Life.

Sometimes I would sneak out of the house with your dad for a late-night meal. I was only sixteen. Jack would close the creamery at midnight and cook Italian food for the locals. This was long before Italian food became so expensive and upscale. He served us what Nana made for us: breaded eggplant and veal, Sicilian red sauces that simmered all day, meatballs and sausage. You can't get that stuff today unless you maybe go to La Villa in Willow Glen. They come close."

Jack Allen, born Giacchino Paolo Aiello, reflects much of the change San Jose witnessed in the past half century. He was a seasoned Italian chef, learning his skills directly from his Sicilian-born parents. The Aiello family was one of the families that came from New York to the Santa Clara Valley in 1917, in search of fresh tomatoes. This family started the first American tomato canning company in upstate New York, called Contadina Foods.

There is a rumor that a card room was either in the back of the creamery or in the basement where "the boys" played poker, and where my dad may have first become serious about his gambling career. The Holland Creamery was one of many drive-ins during the forties and fifties where the waitresses walked out to your car to take your order, and then brought your food order back to your car on a tray, which they attached to your car window.

This was a time in San Jose when everyone knew pretty much everyone, so a simple visit to this establishment was quite the social event, much different than San Jose is today. The Holland Creamery later became Shaky Jakie's

Pizza and then Paolo's, one of the finest Italian restaurants in the Santa Clara Valley, all under the ownership of Jack Allen. My second husband, Harrett, and I used to go to Paolo's for special occasions.

Mom stopped suddenly and turned to look back at the San Carlos Street entrance of the campus.

"We used to drive through here to get to Original Joe's," she said. "You probably don't know this, but Original Joe's was the first large restaurant in San Jose."

"I've never thought of Joe's as *large* mom" I commented. I laughed out loud thinking about the waiters. "I used to imagine that all of the waiters were Mafia members, and I would fantasize about what their Mafia duties were after hours. They looked like characters straight out of a Dick Tracy comic strip."

Mom laughed at the thought. "When I was pregnant with your sister, your dad took me to Joe's and insisted that I order the Original Joe's Special." The Original Joe's Special was a staple in our house, usually served for dinner, but today I have been known to have it for breakfast. It is a concoction of ground sirloin, mushrooms, onions, spinach, and scrambled eggs, sprinkled with Parmesan cheese. "When the waiter placed it in front of me, I took one look at it and I had to turn my head away. I instantly became queasy. Pregnant indigestion took over, and I couldn't eat it." I think it is so ironic that I prepared

the Original Joe's Special for dinner for my husband and me the very night my own son was born.

"Remember how slippery the floors were?" I said. "I don't think you've been there since they covered the floors with carpet, probably to save themselves from lawsuits." We laughed in agreement and I added, "When I was in high school, I used to pretend I was on skis, slipping and sliding to our table. I don't know how they got away with that for so long. I remember one night when Harrett and I were there with Kip and Diane, and Diane and I ordered champagne cocktails. We were sitting on the stairs by the bar trying to get a table. The bartender put salt in our cocktails instead of sugar cubes." Laughing, I said, "I don't know what the guy was thinking. Maybe he thought we were a couple of rich bitches, and he was getting back at us."

We continued our stroll up San Carlos Street. Our time was running out and we would soon meet up with our chauffeurs. We turned left on Seventh Street and walked toward San Fernando to the location where Mom says she attended high school. When we arrived at the crosswalk, Mom looked across the street at Peanuts Café.

"I remember now!" she said excitedly. "It was called The Store. I remember being in The Store one day, and I was late for class. I ran across the street and I jumped to the curb to avoid a puddle that would have ruined my nice clean white bucks. I somehow ended up directly in the puddle I was trying to avoid. My butt landed right in the center of it in front of my whole class." While

this is all very funny today, Mom tells the story with the same embarrassment and humiliation she felt back then.

The Peanuts Café of today is the venerated greasy spoon of all greasy spoons, and the place where many SJSU students who are "cool" go when they want a meal that will stick: breakfast, lunch, and dinner at a very low price (maybe the reason for the name)—a filling meal for "peanuts." I have never ordered anything but the cheeseburger and fries. It is not a large burger, just very filling with an old-fashioned 1950's soda fountain taste when you are licking your wounds, trying to get through a rough semester, or maybe celebrating when the semester is finally over. Peanuts dishes out food for the soul—making what hurts all better.

Since my mother told me the story about The Store, I have never walked through the door of this loveable little dive without thinking about my parents, my aunts, and their friends, and wondering if they shared a burger here too, as I do with my husband, co-workers, and classmates.

Just as Mom and I looked around for our ride, my husband pulled up in the van. We jumped in the back (Italian style, of course—the women in the back and the men in the front). Mom gazed out the car window at what was once a quaint little high school and college.

"Does *anything* look familiar Mom?"

"No. Not really. Everything is so modern now—except for Peanuts."

Recently, I went to Peanuts by myself for lunch. I scanned the room for things: wall coverings, artwork, something that resembled the long lost fifties, a bit of what my parents, my aunts, and their friends might have seen, experienced, or what they might have been as teenagers and young adults.

Today, the restaurant is noisy with a big screen TV, pick-up numbers called out loudly from the grill. There are dishes clanging, hamburgers frying, students talking over the 90-decibal-racket and, yes, there are some loyal faculty and staff from SJSU enjoying the food and the peculiar ambiance of this ancient establishment. The menu hangs over the order bar. The cheeseburger is still the most popular item, but as I look around, I see students who don't have class on Friday, have slept late, and who have ordered breakfast for lunch.

The bartender/owner has stood in the same spot of Peanuts for twenty-nine years. Why would someone do that for such a long time with all of these brainiacs in and out all day? Actually, when I think about it, maybe *he* is the one with all the brains. He is always friendly, and today he asks me where my husband is and if the two of us are still taking classes. I answer politely, and at the same time, I make a mental note that I must come in here too often, and that is why I am having trouble losing weight, and why my blood pressure is a little too high.

There is a mirror on the other side of the bar to make the restaurant look larger. This must have seemed like a good idea at the time, but is rather cheesy looking now. Over the bar hangs a large box to make way for bright lighting.

Tiffany lamps hang from the ceiling throughout the restaurant. Round tables and chairs seat from two to four people but can be pushed together for larger groups. A fake surfboard with a shark bite (remnants of the sixties) hangs over the menu: Land Shark Lager—a beer I have never heard of, and a wood carved warrior Spartan—signs of SJSU's mascot hanging on an opposite wall.

I sit quietly and pensively as I eat my cheeseburger alone, continuing to search for something from a lost age. The bartender curiously glances my way several times, not used to seeing me alone. He stands inside of an oblong bar. One side of the bar is just for paying and the other side is where patrons order beer, usually with food, while kibitzing with this now well-known bartender.

Back in the day, the bar would have been a soda fountain with all of the innocence of the late forties and fifties. I now see the realities of 2012: the unfortunate homeless, college students trying to show off their underwear, college students looking for a well-deserved home-cooked meal. Neon signs advertising beer, and a big screen TV tuned to the sports channel have replaced posters of what was thought of in the fifties as artwork—banana splits, strawberry and chocolate sodas, succulent hamburgers, and a jukebox playing what we now call *Oldies but Goodies*—the same music my parents would have been listening to back then.

Works Cited

Karr, Mary. *The Liars' Club: A Memoir.* New York: Penguin Group, 1995.

McCourt, Frank. *Angela's Ashes: A Memoir.* New York: Scribner, 1996.

Wolff, Tobias. *This Boy's Life: A Memoir.* New York: Grove Press, 1989.